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Oedipus on the Big Screen: The Afterlife of Classical Myth
in 1960s–1970s Cinema

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	3
Abstract	4
Abstract in Italian	4
Introduction	6
Iconology and Film Philology as Methodological Instruments.....	9
State of the Art and Overview of Chapters.....	14
Chapter One: Oedipus on the Ancient Stage	18
The Athenians as Spectators of Themselves.....	19
Oedipus in the Ambiguous Rome of the Principate Period.....	26
Seeing One’s Own Blindness.....	29
Chapter Two: Oedipus in the Modern World	31
“The Whole World Is Watching!”.....	31
Common Sense versus Political Activism in Japan.....	38
The Many Faces of Oedipus in an Era of Changing Paradigms.....	40
Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud (1955) by Herbert Marcuse.....	42
The Structural Study of Myth (1955) by Claude Lévi-Strauss.....	44
Psicoanalisi della guerra (1966) by Franco Fornari.....	45
Il desiderio dissidente (1968) by Elvio Fachinelli.....	46
Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia (1972) by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.....	47
The Anatomy of Dependence (1971) by Takeo Doi.....	49
Chapter Three: Oedipus on the Big Screen	51
Pasolini’s View of Oedipus Beyond Politics and the Radicalization of Freud.....	58
Matsumoto’s Oedipus: Self-Negation and the Emergence of “Neo-Documentarism” and a New Japan.....	77
Oedipus in Chinatown: The Afterlife of a Canonical Detective Structure.....	92
Conclusions	103
Bibliography	106
Primary Sources.....	106
Secondary Sources.....	106
Filmography.....	112

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Abstract

This study examines various cinematic interpretations of the classical Oedipus story, based on three films: *Edipo Re* (1967) by Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Funeral Parade of Roses* (1969) by Toshio Matsumoto, and *Chinatown* (1974) by Roman Polanski. The selection of these works makes it possible to trace the afterlife of the ancient myth and its revisions not only through time (from antiquity to modernity), but also across space (from Ancient Greece to Italy, Japan, and the United States), as well as across different media, from literature to cinema.

Beginning with Aristotle's *Poetics*, the myth of Oedipus has been considered a canonical example of anagnorisis, that is, a moment of transition from ignorance to knowledge, associated with a transformation of the subject and their relation to the world. In this light, the present study proceeds from the assumption that the actualization of the Oedipus story in the cinema of the 1960s–1970s may be understood as a form of reflection on the crisis of earlier regimes of knowledge and power and, more broadly, on the crisis of modernity characteristic of this period.

In order to move beyond assumptions and hypotheses and to rely on robust evidence, the study combines the analysis of the films themselves with a broad range of source materials. These include autobiographical documents of members of film crews, statements by directors in interviews and at film festivals, as well as early critical reviews and media publications, alongside essays and other theoretical writings that shaped the intellectual climate of the period under consideration. Part of the material used, in particular that related to the film *Edipo Re*, is drawn from documents held in the Pier Paolo Pasolini Archive at the Cineteca di Bologna (Italy). Other materials are available in published books and academic articles.

This approach makes it possible to reconstruct a more comprehensive picture of the era and to examine new cinematic representations of Oedipus in close connection with the historical and cultural context of their first appearance on the big screen.

Abstract in Italian

Questo studio esamina diverse interpretazioni cinematografiche del classico mito di Edipo, basandosi su tre film: *Edipo Re* (1967) di Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Funeral Parade of Roses* (1969) di Toshio Matsumoto e *Chinatown* (1974) di Roman Polanski. La selezione di queste opere consente di tracciare la sopravvivenza del mito antico e le sue rielaborazioni non solo nel tempo (dall'antichità alla modernità), ma anche nello spazio (dalla Grecia antica all'Italia, al Giappone e agli Stati Uniti), nonché attraverso diversi media, dalla letteratura al cinema.

A partire dalla *Poetica* di Aristotele, il mito di Edipo è stato considerato un esempio canonico di anagnorisi, ossia un momento di passaggio dall'ignoranza alla conoscenza, associato a una trasformazione del soggetto e del suo rapporto con il mondo. In questa prospettiva, il presente studio muove dall'ipotesi che l'attualizzazione della storia di Edipo nel cinema degli anni Sessanta e Settanta possa essere interpretata come una forma di riflessione sulla crisi dei precedenti regimi di sapere e di potere e, più in generale, sulla crisi della modernità caratteristica di questo periodo.

Al fine di superare assunzioni e ipotesi e di basarsi su evidenze solide, lo studio combina l'analisi dei film stessi con un'ampia gamma di materiali di fonte. Questi includono documenti autobiografici dei membri delle troupe cinematografiche, dichiarazioni dei registi in interviste e in occasione di festival cinematografici, nonché prime recensioni critiche e pubblicazioni mediatiche, insieme a saggi e altri scritti teorici che hanno contribuito a plasmare il clima intellettuale del periodo in esame. Parte del materiale utilizzato, in particolare quello relativo al film *Edipo Re*, proviene da documenti conservati presso l'Archivio Pier Paolo Pasolini della Cineteca di Bologna (Italia). Altri materiali sono disponibili in libri pubblicati e articoli accademici.

Questo approccio consente di ricostruire un quadro più completo dell'epoca e di analizzare le nuove rappresentazioni cinematografiche di Edipo in stretta relazione con il contesto storico e culturale della loro prima apparizione sul grande schermo.

Introduction

— *Your ankles... they tell the story. Look at them.*
— *Why remind me of that, that old affliction?*
— *Your ankles were pinned together. I set you free.*
— *That dreadful mark — I've had it from the cradle.*
— *And you got your name from that misfortune too,
the name's still with you.*

(Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, trans. Robert Fagles¹)

There is no single myth of Oedipus², just as there is no single interpretation of any text or visual image. This myth cannot be reduced to the most famous ancient version by Sophocles, because even before Sophocles, Oedipus was mentioned by Homer, Hesiod, and Aeschylus. Later, with new details and even with a new temperament, he appeared in the works of the Roman poets and philosophers Ovid and Seneca.

Oedipus has reached our time by constantly changing his form, sometimes even losing the meaning of his name because of the limits and inaccuracies of translations from Ancient Greek. In particular, in a number of translations of Sophocles (I mean some Russian-language and English-language versions that I have worked with), there is no mention of Oedipus's swollen feet, from which he received his name (Οἰδίπους = οἰδέω — “swollen” + πούς — “foot”). This physical defect became both his stigma and a material sign of the violence and injustice done to him at the beginning of his life. Oedipus himself, however, does not recognize this mark as a key to the truth about his fate. According to the classicist Bernard Knox, Sophocles makes an ironic point here by adding a second layer to Oedipus's name through a play on words: οἶδα — “I know” or “I see” + δίπους — “two-footed,” whose combination produces another implied name, “the knower on two feet.”³

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, Oedipus merged with the mask of the Freudian psychoanalytic interpretation, which rearticulates the myth in terms of affects, sexuality, repressed desires, the family triangle of father–mother–child, and the theme of incest. This mask, it should be noted, proved to be so sticky that even today, in everyday references to the myth of Oedipus, many people tend to interpret it through a Freudian lens. However, in the second half of the 20th century, this popular interpretation began to be challenged, as scholars and artists tried to return the myth to its ancient readings, to decompose it, or to introduce new anti-Freudian interpretations. All these faces

¹ Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays: Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 220.

² Maurizio Bettini and Giulio Guidorizzi, “Prologo,” in *Il mito di Edipo: Immagini e racconti dalla Grecia a oggi* (Turin: Einaudi, 2004), 33.

³ Bernard Knox, introduction to *The Three Theban Plays: Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus*, by Sophocles, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 139, 152.

of Oedipus appeared in literature, both academic and fictional, as well as in the visual arts, opera, theatre, and cinema. The intellectual responses that contest the psychoanalytic paradigm will be examined in the following sections.

Speaking of cinema, in just one article by the classicist Martin Winkler, who actively develops the method of film philology, titled *Oedipus in Cinema*⁴, more than sixty films are mentioned that contain direct and indirect references to the myth of Oedipus and, therefore, different interpretations of this myth. Even this large-scale overview of examples of Oedipus's revival in cinema cannot be considered exhaustive. For example, although the article was published in 2008, it does not mention the well-known Korean film *Oldboy* (2003), which, according to the director Park Chan-wook himself, refers to the ancient myth⁵. In addition, this publication omits some films that are discussed in detail by Winkler's colleagues in the edited volume *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema*⁶. Nevertheless, as can be seen, the number of direct and indirect references to the myth of Oedipus is quite impressive. Not every classical myth can compete with such durability and with the ability to be revived in cinema again and again.

This study examines one of the most productive and significant periods in the afterlife of this myth: its representation in cinema of the 1960s and 1970s. It is productive because, according to the already mentioned article by Winkler, more than a dozen films containing references to the myth of Oedipus were released in these two decades. It is significant because the 1960s and 1970s were a time marked by a crisis of universalist truths as well as of colonial and Eurocentric knowledge. If we also consider that, since Aristotle's *Poetics*, the myth of Oedipus has been regarded as a canonical example of anagnorisis, which denotes a moment of transition from ignorance to knowledge that transforms the knowing subject and their relationship with the external world⁷, it seems that the representations and reinterpretations of the myth in the cinema of this period resonated with the social, political, and intellectual context of the time. This, in turn, appears to deserve closer study.

This thesis focuses on three films and traces multiple forms and contexts of anagnorisis, as well as the many faces of Oedipus on screen. It explores, for example, how the landmark film *Edipo Re* by Pier Paolo Pasolini (Italy, 1967) reflects the psychoanalytic interpretation of the myth that was widespread in the 20th century, while also moving beyond the classical understanding of this ancient tragedy. The analysis further addresses works that are less explicitly connected to the myth. Among

⁴ Martin M. Winkler, "Oedipus in the Cinema," *Arethusa* 41, no. 1 (Winter 2008).

⁵ Hee-seung Irene Lee, "'My Name Is Oh Dae-su': A Mirrored Image of Oedipus in Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy*," *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema* 8, no. 2 (2016): 127–39.

⁶ Martin M. Winkler, ed., *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁷ John MacFarlane, "Aristotle's Definition of 'Anagnorisis'," *The American Journal of Philology* 121, no. 3 (Autumn 2000): 367.

these is the avant-garde film of the Japanese New Wave, *Funeral Parade of Roses* by Toshio Matsumoto (Japan, 1969), whose narrative reveals a close cultural and value-based affinity between East and West. It portrays the life of the underground gay community in Tokyo and foregrounds the tension between the collective (social control, dominant morality, taboos) and the individual (the will of a person who challenges what is considered socially unacceptable).

The thesis also turns to one of the iconic films of New Hollywood, *Chinatown* by Roman Polanski (USA, 1974), which centers on the moment of the discovery of knowledge, where power functions as a means of legitimizing and normalizing violence in both the social sphere and personal life.

This analysis will allow us to answer the following question: How did the representation in cinema of a key myth of knowledge help to articulate and at the same time reflect the crisis of legitimacy of old regimes of power and knowledge in society?

The originality of this work lies in the combination of components that have previously been studied deeply and carefully, but separately.

Thus, up to the present time, there have been studies that severally examined the social and political crisis of the 1960s and the subsequent reassessment in the 1970s of the legitimacy of old values and paradigms, with the aim of reforming the previous world order and articulating new trends in scholarship (postcolonial studies, critical gender and race studies, etc.), in the arts (new waves in world cinema, the emerging postmodernism in literature and painting, performance art, etc.), and in relations with power (the strengthening of anti-war and anti-capitalist movements).

The representation of the Oedipus myth in cinema has also been studied rather in isolation. Most often, each book or article focuses on only one film that refers to the myth and only partially connects this representation with the social and political agenda of the time of its production, as well as with the classical meanings of the myth (researchers often focus only on one of the masks of Oedipus, namely its psychoanalytic interpretation). An exception here may be the 2013 book *Edipo Re e Medea di Pier Paolo Pasolini: mito, visione e storia di due sfortune* by David Ballerini. In this book, the author analyzes the interpretation of the myth through Pasolini's essays and political statements, showing how his cinema mirrored his own reflection on external events in society and in the intellectual sphere. On the other hand, some existing studies show the multiplicity of images of Oedipus across a broader cinematic landscape, from silent cinema to films of the early 21st century, as, for example, in the work of the already mentioned Winkler, without focusing on the agenda of any specific historical period.

Thus, while existing scholarship has addressed the cinematic reworkings of the Oedipus myth and the broader epistemological crisis of the 1960s–1970s largely as parallel phenomena, this study suggests that their convergence may, in certain cases and to some extent, be non-incidental. This relationship will be examined closely, drawing not only on scholarly literature and film analysis but

also on a range of source materials. Among them are ego-documents, namely memoirs of members of film crews, as well as statements by directors, producers, and screenwriters in interviews and at film festivals. Also included are early critical reviews and media publications, along with essays and other theoretical writings that shaped the social and intellectual climate of the period and addressed both the reconfiguration of the Oedipus myth and its relationship to contemporary social developments. Part of the material used, in particular that related to the film *Edipo Re*, is drawn from documents held in the Pier Paolo Pasolini Archive at the Cineteca di Bologna (Italy). Other materials are available in published books and academic articles.

The relevance of this research lies in the fact that its results may be useful for further studies, for example, in the still underexplored field of the perception of cinematic interpretations of the Oedipus myth in this period. A more precise understanding of how this classical myth was perceived and interpreted by filmmakers, and what worldview features of the intellectual and creative environment of the 1960s–1970s it expressed, could later be compared with how these authorial interpretations were received by audiences. Such a comparison, however, should be undertaken with the understanding that it is complicated by the inherent difficulty of reconstructing past spectatorship due to the scarcity of reliable evidence of viewers' responses. In other words, this study is relevant at least in that it can become a productive basis and a starting point for a more detailed reconstruction of the past, revealing the perspective not only of creators but also of viewers. Secondly, a better understanding of how a classical myth can function as a means of expressing social experience and, at the same time, as a tool for interpreting and making sense of a crisis that affected the whole world during the Cold War makes it possible to see more clearly the connection between cinema and contemporary socio-political processes. This is based on the observation that cinema, like other forms of art, is often able — through indirect and figurative language — to articulate emerging problems that remain unsafe, impossible, or too painful to discuss directly.⁸

Iconology and Film Philology as Methodological Instruments

There are many theoretical and methodological frameworks for studying the migration of ideas, texts, classical myths, and images through time, across space, and across media. For example, there is the relatively recent theory of cultural mobility formulated by the literary historian Stephen Greenblatt

⁸ Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), "Lightness," 3–29. This point is articulated with particular clarity in the essay *Lightness* by Italo Calvino. Although focused on literature rather than cinema, Calvino's argument illustrates how references to ancient myths in modern works may serve as an indirect means of engaging with the upheavals of the present.

and his co-authors in the article *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto*⁹ (2009). Another important framework is Edward Said's concept of *Traveling Theory*, first presented in his essay of the same title in 1982 and later developed more widely in the collection *The World, the Text, and the Critic*¹⁰ (1983). This theory, in essence, crystallized Said's earlier ideas from his key works, where he discusses direct and indirect, and sometimes intentionally hidden, quotations in literature as vehicles for the mobility of specific ideas (*Beginnings: Intention and Method*¹¹, 1975), as well as the spread of ideas through an institutionalized discourse that serves and supports them (*Orientalism*¹², 1978). Also relevant for this dissertation are the ideas of the Italian philosopher and semiotician Umberto Eco, who argued that a myth is a recognizable archetypal sign that does not necessarily originate in antiquity and may also be invented in modernity, and that culture functions by constantly reproducing such signs (that is, myths) in different media. The first step in this line of thought was made in his article on popular culture and the serial nature of the modern myth of Superman (*Il mito di Superman* in the 1964 collection *Apocalittici e integrati*¹³).

All these ideas provide an important theoretical foundation for this research. Familiarity with them helps to better understand different aspects of the mobility of a classical image — the myth of Oedipus — from antiquity to the modern era, from Ancient Greece to Italy, the United States, and beyond, and from literature to visual art. In particular, the theories of Greenblatt and Said focus mainly on the circulation of cultural objects and ideas, on their literal movement from one context and discourse to another, and on the importance of contact zones. Eco emphasizes remakes of myths, intertextuality, and their constant repetition as an essential feature. This point is also important for my work, because I do not intend to argue that the myth of Oedipus suddenly reappeared in cinema in the 1960s–1970s. On the contrary, this myth has always existed in different media, including earlier and later cinema; at some moments it appeared explicitly, and at other times latently. However, according to my hypothesis, in certain periods these revivals or remakes of the myth enter into a strong resonance with what is happening in the surrounding social and cultural context. In Eco's work this idea would be a secondary issue, but for my research it is central. The same applies to the other theoretical frameworks mentioned above: their application often overlooks one important component — how a mythological image is revived in art at a specific time and place, coincides with a worldview shift characteristic of that period and helps to notice, reflect on, experience, or intensify this shift.

⁹ Stephen Greenblatt et al., *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹⁰ Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

¹¹ Edward W. Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (London: Granta Books, 2012).

¹² Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

¹³ Umberto Eco, *Apocalittici e integrati* (Milano: La nave di Teseo, 2025).

This component is central to the iconological approach, which draws on and further develops the concept of *Nachleben* (the afterlife of antiquity), formulated at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries by the German art historian Aby Warburg and later elaborated by his followers.

How is the afterlife of ancient imagery and myths connected to shifts in worldview? The historian Carlo Ginzburg, in his essay *From Aby Warburg to E. H. Gombrich: A Problem of Method*¹⁴, helps to find an answer to this question and at the same time to examine it critically.

For Warburg, who essentially took the first steps toward a completely innovative iconological concept in his 1893 dissertation *Sandro Botticellis 'Geburt der Venus' und 'Frühling'. Eine Untersuchung über die Vorstellungen von der Antike in der italienischen Frührenaissance* (*Sandro Botticelli's 'Birth of Venus' and 'Spring': An Examination of Concepts of Antiquity in the Italian Early Renaissance*), this approach opened a new dimension in the reading of Renaissance paintings. Reflecting on what the influence of ancient models on the works of the 15th century Florentine artist meant, Warburg noticed a recurring stylistic detail: an intensified mimetic language expressed in the movement of bodies, hair, and clothing of the depicted figures. This style, according to Warburg, clearly refers to ancient models, or to *Pathosformeln* (pathos formulas), as he later defined this phenomenon — that is, ancient patterns of exaggerated, intensified mimicry and physical and emotional expressiveness. When asked why these formulas and patterns were widely used in Renaissance painting, Warburg responded with a presumption, or more precisely, a firm belief, that these formulas helped artists of the 15th century move away from the restrained and strict visual norms of the Middle Ages. For Warburg, the popularity of this style and the breaking of old limits were a symptom of broader changes in social values and emotional attitudes of the time¹⁵.

Later, Warburg's successors Friedrich Saxl and Erwin Panofsky further developed this idea, suggesting that the departure from the medieval worldview reflected in the paintings of Botticelli and other Renaissance artists had a much deeper meaning for society. In particular, this departure indicated an awareness of the cultural distance between the past and the present, or what they called “the discovery of the modern ‘historical system’”¹⁶.

For Ernst Gombrich, who was the director of the Warburg Institute in London (formerly the Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg, founded in Hamburg) from 1959 to 1976, such broad extrapolations of meaning to the whole society of the Renaissance seemed doubtful. More specifically, he considered it impossible to find, through meanings consciously or unconsciously embedded by artists in works of the past, “the shortest route to the mentality of civilizations otherwise

¹⁴ Carlo Ginzburg, “From Aby Warburg to E. H. Gombrich: A Problem of Method,” in *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 17–59.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 19–20.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 24–25.

inaccessible to us”¹⁷, and to decipher the spirit of a historical period in this way. Gombrich was generally opposed to the Hegelian concept of the “spirit of the times,” which he saw behind the hypotheses of Saxl and Panofsky about the awareness of a rupture with the Middle Ages and the emergence of a modern “historical system.” Nevertheless, Gombrich himself also practiced the iconological approach as a way to reconstruct the past, but on a more localized and careful level. This allowed him to understand how specific political, poetic, religious, philosophical, and social trends in a particular intellectual environment resonated with revived images of the time.

In his work *Botticelli's Mythologies: A Study in the Neoplatonic Symbolism of His Circle* (1945), Gombrich closely examines evidence that the famous paintings *Spring* and *The Birth of Venus* conveyed Neoplatonic ideas developed in the 15th century by the humanist Marsilio Ficino, the head of the Florentine Platonic Academy. Gombrich analyzes various indications of this both at the level of imagery and symbolism of the paintings, which may refer to the ancient text *The Golden Ass* by the writer and Platonic philosopher Apuleius, and at the level of surrounding written documents related to the paintings. In particular, he examines the content of Ficino’s letter to Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de’ Medici, Botticelli’s patron, in which the Neoplatonist explained the dual nature of Venus as, on the one hand, the embodiment of generative forces and bodily beauty, and, on the other hand, the ideal of pure reason and contemplation of divine beauty. At the end of the letter, Ficino urged his young addressee not to neglect either side and to keep them in balance for his well-being. Referring to this and other letters by Ficino, Gombrich tried to understand whether the same “instructions” were embedded in Botticelli’s canvases¹⁸.

That is, Gombrich avoided extrapolating conclusions that the afterlife of specific motifs, ideas, and features from the ancient world should be seen as direct evidence of a transformation of society. Rather, for Gombrich they functioned as missing pieces in a mosaic that makes it possible to understand how certain ideas, relevant to specific social circles, were reflected in visual art. The difference is subtle but significant. These critical observations by Gombrich also serve as a sobering and disciplining methodological guideline, helping researchers working within the iconological approach not to be carried away by their own speculation, but to remain within the limits of scholarly and evidence-based discourse. A position close to Gombrich’s therefore seems the most appropriate for this research.

It should also be noted that Warburg himself, despite his apparent tendency toward philosophical simplifications in his conclusions, was very careful in practice about collecting evidence for his ideas.

¹⁷ Ernst Hans Gombrich, “Andre Malraux and the Crisis of Expressionism,” *The Burlington Magazine* 96, no. 621 (1954): 374–75, quoted in Carlo Ginzburg, “From Aby Warburg to E. H. Gombrich: A Problem of Method,” 47.

¹⁸ Ernst Gombrich, “Botticelli’s Mythologies: A Study in the Neoplatonic Symbolism of His Circle,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 8 (1945): 7–60.

This was characteristic of a scholar formed in a period when positivism was a strict measure of the validity of scientific research.

Thus, as shown by the above-mentioned essay by Ginzburg and by later publications on this topic, from the time iconology began to take shape in Warburg's practice and was conceptualized in the essays of his followers, it has undergone transformations that have clearly strengthened the method. These developments moved iconology away from the realm of historical intuition — which, like any intuition, can be strong only in exceptional individuals — and into the field of methodological tools with clear areas of application that are accessible to many researchers.

First, the iconological approach makes it possible to identify the presence of an ancient trace in a later work of art. Second, it allows one to build a hypothesis about the meaning of this image and about the resonance of this meaning with the ideas that surrounded the creator of the work and were influential at the time of its creation. Third, it enables the researcher to test this hypothesis by analyzing documents and evidence related to the production of the work.

The wide range of applications of this method today is also shown by the fact that it is now actively used not only in the analysis of Renaissance painting, but also in the study of visual art of other periods¹⁹, and in particular in the analysis of films²⁰ that contain examples of the afterlife of antiquity²¹.

Moving directly to the application of the iconological approach in this study, and taking into account the critical remarks on the method outlined above, it is important to state clearly that this work will not treat the reappearance of the myth of Oedipus in the cinema of the 1960s–1970s as a symptom or proof of a worldview shift. There is no need to prove the existence of such a shift, because, fortunately, much more evidence of it has been preserved than of the formation of a sense of historical distance in the Renaissance period. The crisis and the revision of old values and universalist truths were analyzed and documented in scholarly literature by contemporaries and direct witnesses of these processes. Therefore, the task of this study is more precise: to show the resonance between the artistic cinematic representation of the myth of a crisis of knowledge and the real historical crisis of knowledge.

In the subtitle of this section, I have indicated another methodological instrument that will be used in this study — the relatively new approach of film philology, which combines classical philology and film studies. This approach was introduced in 2001, when the edited volume *Classical Myth and*

¹⁹ Mahyar Asadi and Hasan Bolkhari, "Feasibility Study of Utilizing Iconology in Interpretation of Abstract Works of Art," *Journal of Fine Arts: Visual Arts* 19, no. 4 (2014): 37–46.

²⁰ Wiesław Godzic, "Iconographic-Iconological Method in Film Research," *Artibus et Historiae* 2, no. 3 (1981): 151–57.

²¹ Thomas Y. Levin, "Iconology at the Movies: Panofsky's Film Theory," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 9, no. 1 (1996): 27–55.

Culture in the Cinema, compiled by the already mentioned classicist Martin Winkler, was published. In this book, Winkler described the main principles of the method and, together with his colleagues, analyzed films ranging from early silent cinema to works of the late 1990s, covering different genres, countries, and cinematic movements. This analysis does not focus on evaluating directing or cinematography decisions and pays little attention to film technique, mise-en-scène, or editing. Instead, it concentrates on narrative and thematic content and on identifying connections with classical ideas and mythology. Film philologists, most of whom come from classical studies, examine films in a way similar to how philologists analyze ancient texts, revealing many interesting and not always obvious borrowings from classical literature and imagery. Today this approach is actively developing, which can be seen both in the growing number of academic articles on film written by classicists and in the publication of new books in this field. In particular, Winkler, one of the leading proponents of film philology in contemporary Anglophone scholarship, published in 2024 the book *Classical Antiquity and the Cinematic Imagination*²², in which he expands both the range of films under study and the range of ancient myths, archetypal images, and ideas found in them.

Why is this approach so important for the present study? First, it strengthens the connection with iconology, which is a historical method that traces the migration of ancient motifs into later visual art and cinema through additional evidence such as ego-documents. Second, the lens of classical philology applied to cinema makes it possible to identify such revivals through key attributes of a myth and to analyze more precisely their meanings and later interpretations.

State of the Art and Overview of Chapters

To begin a journey through interpretations of the classical myth of Oedipus without understanding how it was perceived in antiquity would be inconsistent and would contradict both the iconological and the film-philological approach. In order to recognize the transformations of the myth and its key attributes in the 1960s–1970s, it is necessary to be familiar with the images of Oedipus from the time when he first appeared on the ancient stage. This is the focus of the first chapter of the dissertation — *Oedipus on the Ancient Stage*.

The key primary text here is Sophocles' tragedy *Oedipus Tyrannus* (in the translations by Hugh Lloyd-Jones²³ and Robert Fagles²⁴). Although this was not the first text in which the myth of Oedipus was mentioned, it was the first extended dramatic formulation of the myth. When speaking of

²² Martin M. Winkler, *Classical Antiquity and the Cinematic Imagination* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2024).

²³ Sophocles, Ajax. Electra. Oedipus Tyrannus, ed. and trans. Hugh Lloyd-Jones, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

²⁴ Sophocles, The Three Theban Plays: Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Books, 1984).

Sophocles in particular, it is important to consider how his work was perceived by ancient philosophers, for instance, the aforementioned Aristotle. Continuing with primary sources, it is also important to note the ancient Roman version of the tragedy *Oedipus* by Seneca (translated by John Gordon Fitch²⁵), where Oedipus appears less naive and less innocent in the process of uncovering the truth about his past. Seneca's Oedipus seems to sense his own guilt and to anticipate the terrible revelation.

As for secondary literature on the perception of the myth of Oedipus in antiquity and its later transformations, several works serve as key points of reference. Bernard Knox's book *Oedipus at Thebes: Sophocles' Tragic Hero and His Time* (1957) makes it possible to see the figure of Oedipus against the backdrop of Athens at the time when Sophocles' tragedy was written and first staged. The second work is Anthony J. Boyle's 2011 book *Seneca: Oedipus*, a study comparable in scope and depth, within its historical framework, to Knox's analysis of Sophocles' *Oedipus*. Finally, another important work is *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (1972) by the French historian, anthropologist, and structuralist Jean-Pierre Vernant and his colleague, the historian Pierre Vidal-Naquet. In this book, the authors show what the myth of Oedipus meant for the inhabitants of ancient Athens and how it represented social problems relevant at the time, in particular the fear of the confrontation between individual will and a greater power (the gods, fate, the state).

The second chapter — *Oedipus in the Modern World* — is devoted to the social, political, and creative atmosphere of the 1960s–1970s. More specifically, it addresses the outbreak of social and intellectual crisis in the 1960s and its later articulation and search for new paradigms in the 1970s, as well as the ways in which the myth of Oedipus was integrated into this climate and reinterpreted.

A detailed overview of the socio-political upheavals that influenced the reassessment of regimes of power, knowledge, and universalist truths is provided by the historian Jeremi Suri in the book *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente*. Further orientation in the field of changing values and their reflection in Western culture in the 1960s–1970s is offered by Arthur Marwick's 1998 book *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States*. Since this dissertation examines the afterlife of the myth of Oedipus not only in European and American cinema but also in avant-garde Japanese cinema, it is also important to understand the postwar context in Japan. Despite the mass Anpo protests against the Security treaty with the United States, the agreement was signed, followed by a Western-oriented reshaping of Japan's image and value system. Although public protest was suppressed through the "soft power" of American diplomacy, creative resistance continued within artistic circles. The historian and Japan specialist William Marotti, in the

²⁵ Seneca, *Tragedies*, Volume II: Oedipus. Agamemnon. Thyestes. Hercules on Oeta. Octavia, ed. and trans. John G. Fitch, Loeb Classical Library 78 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

book *Money, Trains, and Guillotines: Art and Revolution in 1960s Japan*, examines protest art and shows how the political climate resonated with the creative climate. This helps to better sense the atmosphere in which the Japanese New Wave cinema emerged.

To understand the different faces of Oedipus in this period and the forms taken by anagnorisis, this study turns to the book by the Italian classicists and anthropologists Maurizio Bettini and Giulio Guidorizzi, *Il mito di Edipo*, which builds a bridge between ancient perceptions of the myth and its modern interpretations. In particular, the authors discuss the anthropological interpretation introduced in 1955 by Claude Lévi-Strauss in the essay *The Structural Study of Myth*. This approach proposes abandoning the view of myth as a narrative and instead focusing on its key attributes and their relationships in order to see how myth communicates social relations and defines the boundaries of normality and taboo. The myth of Oedipus, used by Lévi-Strauss as an example, demonstrates a model for resolving contradictions that arise when individual will comes into conflict with existing taboos in the external world (kin killing, incest, suicide). Another interpretation discussed in *Il mito di Edipo* is the Freudian reading of the myth of Oedipus. Bettini and Guidorizzi describe this interpretation as reductive because it limits the myth to sexuality and excludes key attributes such as knowledge, blindness, and the boundaries between the human and the out of human. In 1972, this interpretation was more radically criticized by the French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their work *Capitalisme et schizophrénie. L'anti-Oedipe*. The authors describe the Freudian Oedipus myth as an instrument of the capitalist regime of power that imposes neurotic states on individuals (such as sexual desire toward the parent or the “big Other”) in order to facilitate control, to promote the belief that it is natural to love the “big Other” who provides benefits, and to increase consumption through the manipulation of desire.

Of course, this is only a brief outline of ideas articulated by contemporaries of Oedipus on the big screen in the 1960s–1970s. The second and third chapters of this study will examine these reinterpretations in more detail.

The third chapter, as indicated by its title — *Oedipus on the Big Screen* — is devoted to cinematic interpretations of the myth of Oedipus and their conjunction with moments of anagnorisis in the socio-political and intellectual context of the period under study. A broad overview of interpretations of the myth in cinema is provided by the already mentioned article by Martin Winkler, *Oedipus in the Cinema*. Although it does not focus specifically on the 1960s–1970s, it presents a wide range of visual interpretations of Oedipus, both direct and indirect, sometimes recognizable only through a few key attributes. For a more detailed analysis of the selected films — *Edipo Re* by Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Funeral Parade of Roses* by Toshio Matsumoto, and *Chinatown* by Roman Polanski — this thesis will draw, as outlined above, on archival sources and ego-documents available in the form of published books and essays, as well as on academic articles and monographs devoted specifically to

these films and to interpretations of the Oedipus myth within them. These include, for example, the important source-based study *Edipo Re e Medea di Pier Paolo Pasolini: mito, visione e storia di due sfortune* by David Ballerini, and the book *La Grecia secondo Pasolini: Mito e cinema* by Massimo Fusillo, as well as such academic articles as *Edipo al funerale delle rose. L'Edipo re di Sofocle nel cinema di Toshio Matsumoto* by Roberto Mario Danese, and *An American Tragedy: "Chinatown"* by Mary-Kay Gamel in the volume *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema*, among others.

The combination of scholarly literature and primary sources makes it possible to move beyond speculation and hypotheses toward evidence-based interpretations of how the crisis of knowledge embodied in the myth of Oedipus both reflected and helped to articulate responses to the crisis of modernity.

Chapter One: Oedipus on the Ancient Stage

So that one should wait to see the final day and should call none among mortals fortunate, till he has crossed the bourne of life without suffering grief.

(Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, trans. Hugh Lloyd-Jones¹)

This chapter examines Oedipus in the context of antiquity. We will not go too far back in time and search for the attributes of a proto-Oedipus. Knowing that the myth of Oedipus is already mentioned in Homer, we will start from the moment when this myth becomes more than a folkloric character — by the 5th century BCE. It was a time when Sophocles created a tragedy based on this myth and turned Oedipus into a dramatic character endowed with many traits and details, and, most importantly, with his own life path. This chapter will also examine the second surviving ancient tragedy fully devoted to the myth of Oedipus. Like the play by Sophocles, it tells the story of Oedipus not as a fragment of a larger narrative, but reveals his character in many aspects: mentioning his childhood, his true origin, and showing his downfall at the height of life. This is the tragedy of the Roman Stoic philosopher and statesman Seneca, written in Latin in the 1st century CE. It was undoubtedly partly inspired by Sophocles' *Oedipus*, but this work shows us a new Oedipus, with a different character, reactions, and thoughts.

Here it seems important to emphasize the difference between the folkloric myth and the tragic myth, which took shape approximately from the end of the 6th century BCE together with the emergence of tragedy. As the historians Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet state in the preface to their book *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, myth for the progressive Greek polis, such as Athens in the 5th century BCE, which had already invented legal and political instruments of self-government, ceased to carry the force it had carried before in more archaic times. Before the 6th–5th centuries BCE, it was an instrument of social regulation: the death of mythic heroes as a result of reckless actions, fueled by vanity, envy, and anger, served as a kind of negative examples of behavior for those who perceived this myth from the mouths of rhapsodes such as Homer. For a polis that had found new, more effective, more universal, and more finely tuned forms of managing social order, myth becomes something borderline: on the one hand, it can still lead someone to moral conclusions; on the other hand, it grows into an element that no longer gives unambiguous answers to ethically tense questions, as folkloric myths did. It is no longer an instruction about what should be done and what

¹ Sophocles, *Ajax. Electra. Oedipus Tyrannus*, ed. and trans. Hugh Lloyd-Jones, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 483.

should not be done. The mythical character now acquires a more complex and less unambiguous nature, which brings him even closer to real life.²

In the same text, Vernant and Vidal-Naquet make another important methodological point that should be taken into account when examining the meaning of the myth of Oedipus in antiquity, and which is equally relevant for the analysis of its modern reinterpretations, particularly in the context of the 1960s–1970s. To study a myth within its historical context is not the same as “to discover what was going on in Sophocles’ head as he wrote his play,”³ not least because there is no documented reflection on this matter on the part of the dramatist. Even if such records had survived, “they would have represented no more than supplementary sources of evidence that we should have had to submit to critical appraisal like any others.”⁴ Instead, they propose to view the tragic myth of Oedipus not as the expression of a single intention or a clear interpretation, but as a complex phenomenon in which social, political, aesthetic, psychological, and other dimensions are interrelated, as far as can be reconstructed on the basis of historical evidence.⁵

That is, this chapter will not provide a monosemantic answer to the question of what the myth of Oedipus meant for an ancient person; it will only outline a body of the most well-grounded assumptions on this issue, which will allow a comparative analysis with a body of other assumptions about the meaning of this myth for a person of the 20th century. This, in turn, will help to understand to what extent modern interpretations of this myth carry the attributes of ancient interpretations and in the literal sense represent an afterlife of antiquity, and to what extent this myth has detached from its ancient form and has been reinvented or reborn and now represents completely different values and ideas of completely different people — people of modernity.

The Athenians as Spectators of Themselves

One of the most important and serious works that analyzes Sophocles’ tragedy about Oedipus in the context of contemporary Athens is the book by Bernard Knox, *Oedipus at Thebes: Sophocles’ Tragic Hero and His Time* (1957). Although Knox was a classical philologist, he also worked on this book as a historian, as he notes in the preface to the 1998 reprint. He lists among the sources he used the works of philosophers, mathematicians, physicians, and historians of the 5th century BCE, speeches of orators in court, and so on: “I was looking for evidence that Sophocles had chosen words for his mythical characters, and for Oedipus above all, that called to mind the political and legal context of

² Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, “Preface to Volume I,” in *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (New York: Zone Books, 1990), 7.

³ *Ibid.*, 8–9.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

contemporary Athenian life and the many facets of the intellectual fervor of the age, as well as the stages of humankind's progress from savagery to the civilization of the city-state.”⁶

Knox begins his discussion of the meaning of Sophocles' reinterpretation of the myth of Oedipus for his contemporaries with a critique of the claim that Sophocles' Oedipus is a tragedy of fate or of human insignificance before some external force that lies beyond his will and responsibility.

According to Knox, all tragic decisions made by Sophocles' characters, from Oedipus himself to his wife (and mother) Jocasta, are expressions of their own will. On the one hand, Oedipus did seek to listen to an external force — the prophecy of the oracle of Apollo, who ordered that the murderer of the former king (Laius, Oedipus' father) be found, punished, and expelled from Thebes, because only in this way could the plague that had struck the polis, now ruled by Oedipus, be stopped. On the other hand, the prophecy did not say that Oedipus must uncover the truth about his own origin at any cost, and, more importantly, publicly reveal his identity. That is, he listened to the external force, but interpreted it in his own way. The exact wording of the prophecy can be found in the scene where Creon, Jocasta's brother, returns from the oracle (the fragment is given here in the translation by Hugh Lloyd-Jones, as it is considered one of the most literal English translations of the tragedy from Ancient Greek):

“Creon

I will tell you what I heard from the god. The lord Phoebus⁷ orders us plainly to drive out from the land a pollution, one that has been nourished in this country, and not to nourish it till it cannot be cured.

Oedipus

With what means of purifying? what is the nature of the trouble?

Creon

By banishment, or by repaying killing with killing, since it is this bloodshed that has brought the storm upon the city.

Oedipus

And who is the man whose fate he is revealing?

Creon

King Laius was once lord of this land, before you guided it.

Oedipus

I know from hearsay, for I never saw him.

Creon

He was killed, and the god now tells us plainly to punish his killers, whoever they may be.

⁶ Bernard Knox, “Preface to the New Edition,” in *Oedipus at Thebes: Sophocles' Tragic Hero and His Time* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), xi–xii.

⁷ Phoebus is an epithet of the god Apollo, commonly used in ancient Greek and Roman sources to refer to Apollo as a solar and prophetic deity.

Oedipus

Where in the world are they? Where shall the track of an ancient guilt, hard to make out, be found?

Creon

He said, in this country. What one looks for can be caught, but what one neglects escapes.”⁸

Thus, Oedipus had the possibility to act differently in response to this prophecy. What he did next was entirely his personal choice. Knox emphasizes: “The main events of the play are in fact not even part of the prophecy: Apollo predicted neither the discovery of the truth, the suicide of Jocasta, nor the self-blinding of Oedipus.”⁹

In the fact that the role of fate and divine will gives way to the will of the hero himself, Knox sees the key difference between this tragedy and the earlier canon, where the hero was usually a puppet of higher powers. This, in turn, highlights the connection of this tragedy with the social, political, and intellectual processes that were taking place in the 5th century BCE Athens.¹⁰

As already briefly mentioned, Athens of Sophocles’ time was an advanced polis and a center of attraction for scholars and artists because of its developed democracy, laws, and economic prosperity, which made it possible to encourage new ideas and financially support representatives of the intellectual and creative community. The latest achievements of science (for example, a growing orientation toward evidence-based medicine, where diseases were explained not as punishment by the gods but through physiological causes; or physical rather than divine explanations of celestial phenomena such as eclipses, and so on) made people more inclined to think logically, to draw conclusions based on evidence, and to treat prophecies more skeptically, doubting the influence of the gods on life and surrounding processes.

This skepticism toward prophecies runs through the whole play by Sophocles. For example, when the blind prophet Tiresias, who at first refused to tell Oedipus that he himself was the murderer of Laius, finally, under pressure and threats of execution from Oedipus, reveals this truth to him, the first reaction of the main hero is doubt and suspicion that Tiresias is involved in a conspiracy with Creon, who had earlier brought the disturbing prophecy from the oracle of Apollo:

“O riches and kingship and skill surpassing skill in a life much-envied, how great is the hatred that you store up, if it is for the sake of this royal power, which the city placed in my hands as a gift, though I had not asked it, that Creon the trusty, my friend from the first, has crept up to me and longs to throw

⁸ Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, in *Ajax. Electra. Oedipus Tyrannus*, ed. and trans. Hugh Lloyd-Jones, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 335-337.

⁹ Bernard Knox, “Chapter One: Hero,” in *Oedipus at Thebes: Sophocles’ Tragic Hero and His Time* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 6.

¹⁰ Knox, “Chapter One: Hero,” 45–47.

me out, setting upon me this wizard hatcher of plots, this crafty beggar, who has sight only when it comes to profit, but in his art is blind!”¹¹

Jocasta also doubts the prophecy of the oracle and of Tiresias. This is expressed in the scene where a messenger arrives in Thebes with the news that Polybus, Oedipus’ adoptive father, whom Oedipus still considers his real parent, has passed away:

“Iocaste”¹²

Servant, go at once and tell this to the master! O prophecies of the gods, where are you? Oedipus long avoided this man for fear of killing him, and now he has died a natural death, not at his hands.

Oedipus

My dearest wife, Iocaste, why have you summoned me here from the house?

Iocaste

Listen to this man, and then ask where the god’s revered oracles stand!”¹³

This approach in Sophocles’ play, where divine providence is questioned, fate becomes a background, and the real destructive force turns out to be the actions of the hero, indeed can hardly be called a tragedy of fate. A closer category, also often used in relation to Oedipus, is a tragedy of knowledge, or, in Knox’s words, a tragedy of “the fundamental ignorance of man”¹⁴ (symbolically, this is clearly expressed in the play through a paradox: Oedipus has keen vision, yet he cannot see the truth). In other words, this is the problem of self-acceptance after the moment of anagnorisis, when a person realizes that, no matter how much one strives for well-being, progress, and happiness, it is impossible to fully understand what these things really are. It seems that, even after achieving everything that was desired, this well-being is then abandoned because of doubt, ambition, unwillingness to compromise, a desire for perfection, and a thirst for even greater benefit. This echoes Vernant’s view of Sophocles’ play and of the main principle of ancient tragedy in general — at its core there is always a paradox, a reversal, ambiguity (Oedipus is at the same time a noble and caring king-protector, and also a tyrant-polluter who gained power through immoral patricide and incest).¹⁵ In this light, the ancient tragic myth of Oedipus is rather a myth that reflects the duality and contradictions of human existence.

Both in the play and in the intellectual and cultural life of 5th century BCE Athens, the focus is on the human being and on human complexity, and on the impossibility of explaining some actions by divine will. Through education and intellect, through readiness to take responsibility and risk, even

¹¹ Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, trans. Lloyd-Jones, 363.

¹² The spelling Iocaste is retained in quotations in accordance with the cited translation by Lloyd-Jones.

¹³ Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, trans. Lloyd-Jones, 421.

¹⁴ Knox, “Chapter One: Hero,” 49.

¹⁵ Jean-Pierre Vernant, “Ambiguity and Reversal: On the Enigmatic Structure of *Oedipus Rex*,” in *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (New York: Zone Books, 1990), 113–140.

against the prophecies of the gods, the human being reached a high level of development and progress. Human beings became capable of solving the most difficult riddles of nature and improving life; laws were invented; methods to cure severe diseases were developed; through experience, strategies and tactics for protecting the community were formed, which require practical knowledge and skills that the gods hardly sent from Olympus as step-by-step instructions, especially if one recalls how vague and unclear oracle prophecies sound. Oedipus, who also made himself (he solved the riddle of the Sphinx, which had been impossible for any mortal before; being a foreigner, he became king in Thebes not by right of inheritance, but because he was chosen by the people, etc.), turns out to be a kind of collective representation of the Athenian of Sophocles' time.

There are versions that Oedipus in Sophocles' tragedy was an artistic representation of the Athenian ruler, patron of democracy, and general Pericles. However, according to Knox, the traits embedded in Oedipus do not fully coincide with the features of Pericles, judging by how contemporaries described him, although he could undoubtedly be one of the facets of Oedipus.¹⁶ Possibly it was the facet that expresses intellect, wisdom, courage, respect for the opinion of the people, protection and care for them. In particular, in the play Oedipus sincerely pities the people of Thebes suffering from the plague and seeks to find the murderer of Laius in order to stop the death that is taking more and more lives. He conducts the investigation of Laius' murder on the basis of evidence and reveals the truth, even though it brings him personal disaster. Another telling moment that emphasizes his openness and respect for the people is his refusal of Creon's proposal to discuss the oracle's prophecy privately in the palace: Oedipus demanded that the words transmitted by the god Apollo be announced publicly in the square before the people.

Along with these virtues, Oedipus is prone to outbursts of rage¹⁷, in one of which he killed his true father Laius. Despite Oedipus' democratic qualities, he also has traits of a tyrant¹⁸ (as indicated by the original Ancient Greek title of the play — Οιδίππου Τύραννος): he is suspicious¹⁹, proud, and harsh in making decisions about punishing those whom he despises and considers villains — as shown in the already mentioned scenes where Oedipus accuses Creon and Tiresias of treason. He is intolerant of ignorance and is confident that he is capable of grasping any truth; he is uncompromising and approaches his investigation with exceptional perfectionism even when everyone tries to stop him: Tiresias, who reveals the truth with great difficulty; Jocasta, who urges him not to give importance to prophecies; and the shepherd, who is afraid to reveal to Oedipus the secret of his origin — the same

¹⁶ Knox, "Chapter Two: Athens," 63–64.

¹⁷ Knox, "Chapter One: Hero," 28.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 6.

shepherd who carried him out of Thebes when he was still an infant and handed him over to his adoptive parents.

All these traits, according to Knox's arguments, reflect the perception of Athens and Athenians in the Greek world of the 5th century BCE. In particular, the dualism of democracy and tyranny characteristic of Oedipus was noted by Sophocles' contemporary, the historian Thucydides, in his work *The History of the Peloponnesian War*. Knox cites the following quotations from Thucydides' work: a passage from the speech of the Athenian envoy to the people of Camarina in Sicily: "for a man who is tyrannos or a city which has an empire, nothing is unreasonable which is expedient"²⁰; statements of the Corinthians (allies of Sparta, which was fighting against Athens in the Peloponnesian War), angered by Athenian dominance in Greece: "We are allowing the establishment of a city [Athens] as tyrannos,"²¹ or "the city which has been set up as tyrannos in Greece."²²

Athenians, like Oedipus, were also characterized by courage and pride in themselves: "it is our hereditary right to be always in the first place."²³ Quick reaction to a problem, which in Oedipus sometimes looks like impulsiveness, was an advantage of the Athenians in war, as even their opponents, the Corinthians, noted: "They are quick to form a plan and to put their decision into practice," and "they are the only people who simultaneously hope for and have what they plan, because of their quick fulfilment of decisions."²⁴ The already mentioned ruler of Athens during the period of its dominance in Greece, Pericles, who, as discussed above, also partly served as a prototype for the image of Oedipus in Sophocles' play, in his speeches to the Athenians emphasized their intellectual superiority and the necessity of contempt for enemies: "Meet your enemies not just with confidence but with contempt. Confidence may spring simply from ignorance which has been lucky, and may exist in a coward; contempt is reserved for him who has faith in his intellectual superiority to the enemy, and this is the case with us."²⁵ This essentially describes the traits that Oedipus demonstrates through his behavior in the play.

Like Oedipus, Athens, engaged in the prolonged Peloponnesian War (431–404), was not ready to compromise or retreat. And like Oedipus, it would eventually suffer defeat. This war ended in catastrophe for Athens: the fleet and the Long Walls connecting the polis with the port were

²⁰ Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, Book VI, 85, quoted in Knox, "Chapter Two: Athens," 60–61.

²¹ Thucydides, Book I, 122, quoted in Knox, "Chapter Two: Athens," 61.

²² Thucydides, Book I, 124, quoted in Knox, "Chapter Two: Athens," 61.

²³ Herodotus, *Histories*, Book IX, 27, quoted in Knox, "Chapter Two: Athens," 68.

²⁴ Thucydides, Book I, 70, quoted in Knox, "Chapter Two: Athens," 69–70.

²⁵ Thucydides, Book II, 62, quoted in Knox, "Chapter Two: Athens," 71.

destroyed, which had ensured food supplies delivered by sea; the Athenian empire collapsed; and the polis was forced to follow the policy of the victorious Sparta.²⁶

It is interesting that, according to the surviving evidence, the tragedy *Oedipus Tyrannus* was written by Sophocles in the early years of the Peloponnesian War (around 429 BCE). In this light, there is, of course, a temptation to call it prophetic. Knox, without appealing to mysticism, responds that despite the confidence of the Athenians and of Pericles as a commander in their own strength, at the moment when Athens, already engaged in the war, was exhausted by the plague (another clear connection with the tragedy, where Thebes ruled by Oedipus also suffers from a plague), Pericles himself discussed the possibility of defeat and how it should be accepted with dignity: “Even if we should ever in the present struggle be forced to give in (for all things are born to be diminished) yet the memory will live that being Greeks we ruled over the greater part of the Greek nation, that we sustained the burden of wars against our enemies both as individuals and as members of a united league, and that we inhabited a city that was in all respects the greatest and richest of its time.”²⁷

After this, it seems quite likely that, watching the tragedy of Oedipus unfolding on the Athenian stage in the 5th century BCE, some citizens saw themselves in the image of the main hero and their possible future in his fate.

Knox, who proposed this hypothesis of how Sophocles’ contemporaries perceived the play and collected evidence supporting this view, also saw another parallel with the ancient Oedipus. This parallel was rooted in his own time. In the already mentioned 1998 preface to his book *Oedipus at Thebes*, Knox writes: “A play, however, which suggests that, for all its great achievements, human ingenuity may be fatally flawed, does not seem irrelevant for an age that lives in dread of atomic and biological warfare, not to mention the nightmare possibilities offered by the latest developments in genetics.”²⁸ He uses this argument not only to show that the timeless depth of the problem raised by Sophocles’ tragedy makes this play relevant, close, and touching for audiences of different eras. He also uses it as a critique of the recently emerged approach of “new historicism,” which, in his view, denies the value of giving great importance to the historical context of a work because this may limit its interpretation, and at the same time “rejects claims of enduring significance over the centuries as mere illusions.”²⁹ In his opinion, the meanings embedded in a work already in antiquity can be revived centuries later and serve as the main magnet attracting the viewer’s attention and interest, and sometimes be even more important for the audience than modern interpretations.

²⁶ Knox, “Chapter Two: Athens,” 99.

²⁷ Thucydides, Book II, 64, quoted in Knox, “Chapter Two: Athens,” 105.

²⁸ Knox, “Preface to the New Edition,” xiii.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, xiii.

Oedipus in the Ambiguous Rome of the Principate Period

Ancient Rome, in which Seneca created his Oedipus, was ruled by the Julio-Claudian dynasty, which established the Principate — a form of the early Empire in which power was essentially monarchical, but formally remained republican, that is, it coexisted with the Senate, magistracies, and popular assemblies. In practice, the emperor, who was considered *princeps* (from the Latin “first senator”), had more influence over state processes and decisions than the Senate as a whole or the people. Therefore, this institutional structure can reasonably be described as autocracy under a cover.³⁰ Given this ambiguity of power in the 1st century CE Rome, it may seem that a tragedy about Oedipus — which, in Vernant’s view, by its structure was “an extreme case of ambiguity”³¹ — is nothing less than Seneca’s reflection, or even a political statement, about his own time.

This hypothesis was actively discussed by classicists in the 1960s–1970s. In particular, John David Bishop, in the article *Seneca's "Oedipus": Opposition Literature*, published in 1978, radicalizes this idea to the point that he essentially calls Seneca’s reinterpretation of the myth of Oedipus a concealed political code. In his reasoning, Bishop relies on the ideas of the historian Ramsey MacMullen from his book *Enemies of the Order* (1966). MacMullen argued that in Rome of the 1st–5th centuries CE it was dangerous to criticize power directly, so such criticism was expressed indirectly and often disguised as myth or another literary artistic image, the decoding of which was available only to an educated circle involved in state processes.³² According to Bishop, the criticism in the play *Oedipus* was directed at a specific political figure — Emperor Nero, who ruled from 54 to 68. It is also important to note that Nero, from early youth, was a student of the Stoic Seneca, but after suspicions of the teacher’s involvement in a plot against him, Nero ordered Seneca to commit suicide. These details, at least on an emotional level, suggest that the play was a veiled opposition text. Moreover, if we turn to Apollo’s prophecy, which Creon brought from the oracle in Seneca’s tragedy:

“Kindly stars will return to Thebes, the city of Cadmus,
If only the stranger leaves Ismenian Dirce³³ for exile,
Guilty of killing a king, known from an infant to Phoebus.”³⁴

— then the tragedy was, in essence, a call for the emperor’s exile.

³⁰ Fergus Millar, “Triumvirate and Principate,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 63 (1973): 50–67.

³¹ Vernant, “Oedipus in Athens,” 321. Vernant formulates this argument with reference to Sophocles’ play; however, as will be discussed below, this layer of meaning remains present in Seneca.

³² John David Bishop, “Seneca’s ‘Oedipus’: Opposition Literature,” *The Classical Journal* 73, no. 4 (1978): 289.

³³ Ismenian Dirce is a poetic designation of Thebes, referring to the spring Dirce and the river Ismenus associated with the city.

³⁴ Seneca, *Oedipus*, in *Oedipus. Agamemnon. Thyestes. Hercules on Oeta. Octavia*, ed. and trans. John G. Fitch, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 37.

Bishop argues for his hypothesis by drawing parallels between Nero's biography and the dramatic path of Oedipus. For example, he refers to claims, assumptions, and rumors recorded in ancient literature by Tacitus and Suetonius — not facts — that Nero had a sexual relationship with his mother Agrippina. He also argues that Nero was responsible for her death, just as Oedipus is responsible for Jocasta's suicide, with whom he committed incest.³⁵ However, Nero was responsible for his mother's death not out of ignorance, as Oedipus was: he himself ordered her execution because he began to feel that she was a threat to his political regime.³⁶

Later scholarship, in particular John Gordon Fitch's commentary to his own English translation of Seneca's *Oedipus* from Latin, notes that the play could have been written by Seneca before Nero became ruler.³⁷ Accordingly, it would be rash to claim that it was an allegorical critique of one specific emperor. Anthony J. Boyle, the author of *Seneca: Oedipus* is also cautious here. He does not identify targeted criticism in the play, due to the absence of reliable evidence for this hypothesis. In his view, Seneca created a work that could be read by contemporaries in political terms, but it more likely reflects the problems of Julio-Claudian Rome as a whole: a suspicious and tense political climate, moral destabilization, and a loss of Stoic optimism.³⁸ Seneca's Oedipus is endowed with these very traits. The virtues present in Sophocles' Oedipus — sharp intellect, reasonableness, and courage — are hardly visible behind his heavy personal manifestations. Here are several telling fragments from Oedipus' opening monologue: "What I fear is unremarkable: that I may kill my father with my own hand"³⁹ — he is under the weight of his own guilt for patricide, which he senses. He is suspicious, does not trust himself or believe in himself, and cannot bear with Stoic endurance the disaster into which Thebes, suffering from plague, has fallen: "When you dread some great evil, you must fear even what you think impossible. I take fright at everything, and do not place my trust even in myself"⁴⁰ or "At this very moment fate is preparing some device against me"⁴¹. He is obsessed with power and at the same time fears both having it and losing it: "Does anyone find joy in kingship? So deceptive, good, hiding so many evils behind its seductive appearance!"⁴² and "Spurn kingdom

³⁵ Bishop, "Seneca's 'Oedipus': Opposition Literature," 293.

³⁶ Trevor Luke, "From Crisis to Consensus: Salutory Ideology and the Murder of Agrippina," *Illinois Classical Studies* 38 (2013): 207–228.

³⁷ John G. Fitch, "Introduction," in *Oedipus. Agamemnon. Thyestes. Hercules on Oeta. Octavia*, 7.

³⁸ Anthony J. Boyle, *Seneca: Oedipus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

³⁹ Seneca, *Oedipus*, trans. John G. Fitch, 19.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, 19.

infected by your deadly hand, leave behind the tears, the deaths, the corruptive maladies in the sky which you bring with you as a fateful stranger”⁴³.

In this scene, Oedipus is alone in his torment and isolated from his people — he speaks this desperate speech to himself, rather than addressing the chorus representing the citizens of Thebes, as in Sophocles.

Later, when Jocasta appears after his monologue, she reproaches him for a lack of steadfastness:

“How does it help, my husband, to make troubles heavier by bemoaning them? The quality of a king lies, I think, in the very ability to take on adversities. [...] It is not manly to retreat before Fortune”⁴⁴.

Even the moment of anagnorisis differs from the gradual analytical discovery of the truth, as in Sophocles. There, Oedipus, although impatient in his desire to uncover the truth, gathers facts and evidence from real life, in a manner comparable to courtroom proceedings in 5th century Athens. Truth for Seneca’s Oedipus is not grounded in reality: it becomes defined for both the characters and the spectators already at the moment when the seer Tiresias, during a mystical ritual, summons the spirit of Laius, and Laius directly names Oedipus as his murderer.

All these details hardly create a praising or even neutral image of a ruler; they indeed look like criticism of the holder of power. Reflecting on the possible parallel of this image specifically with Nero, Boyle notes that such a direct association was most likely created not by Seneca himself, but emerged in later ancient literature, both artistic and historical. For example, those who described the murder of Nero’s mother Agrippina likely used as a model the scene from Seneca’s *Oedipus* with Jocasta’s suicide, who, unlike in Sophocles’ tragedy, did not hang herself but stabbed her womb with a sword. These descriptions were similar to the tragedy both in form and in meaning, implying that Agrippina did in fact have an incestuous relationship with Nero. The first example is from the play *Octavia*, which was most likely written after Nero’s death:

“The dying misfortunate asks
Her executioner
To sink the vile sword in her womb,
Saying: ‘Stab here with your steel, here —
Where this monstrosity was born”⁴⁵

The second is from the *Annals* by the 2nd century CE Roman historian Tacitus:

⁴³ Ibid, 23.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 25.

⁴⁵ Pseudo-Seneca, *Octavia*, vv. 368–372, quoted in Boyle, *Seneca: Oedipus*, lxxxii.

“The assassins surround her couch, and first the trireme captain struck her with a club. Then, as the centurion drew his sword for the deathblow, thrusting forward her womb she shouted, ‘Strike the belly’, and was despatched with many wounds”⁴⁶.

Moreover, the impression that Nero was the prototype for Oedipus in Seneca’s tragedy is strengthened by the fact that Nero, who adored the theatre and seems to have considered himself a brilliant actor, repeatedly performed the role of Oedipus. Boyle mentions this detail with references to the works of the ancient historians Suetonius and Cassius Dio.⁴⁷

Thus, taking all these details into account, it would be incorrect to narrow the meaning of the myth of Oedipus in Seneca’s interpretation only to opposition to the specific emperor Nero. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to speak about the resonance of this tragedy with the political climate of 1st century Rome, and about the fact that the play could, in general, criticize the Principate. This also does not exclude another, more philosophical interpretation, which the philologist Donald J. Mastronarde outlines in his article *Seneca's Oedipus: The Drama in the Word* (1970). Since Seneca was one of the leading ideologues of Stoicism, the tragedy may embed an example of how terrifying, anxious, distorted, and tragic the path of a person can be if one is not ready to accept with humility that not everything is subject to human control and influence.⁴⁸

Seeing One’s Own Blindness

To conclude the overview of the meanings that, according to classical philologists and historians of antiquity, could have been perceived in the tragedies of Sophocles and Seneca by their contemporaries, it is important to note one point on which many scholars converge. Namely, that the psychoanalytic interpretation of the Oedipus myth, proposed by Freud at the end of the 19th century, represents a modern development and may not be regarded as a universally applicable reading of the tragedy.

Researchers describe the marriage of Oedipus and Jocasta as an act of legitimizing Oedipus’ power in Thebes.⁴⁹ This is also confirmed by a careful reading of the tragedies of both Sophocles and Seneca, where neither the actions nor the words of Oedipus reveal any attraction to Jocasta or any signs of passion between them. On the contrary, in the tragedies one can see Oedipus’ horror and disgust when he realizes that he may, unknowingly, have violated a moral law and lain with his mother. This is articulated in Sophocles in Oedipus’ speech after his self-blinding: “But now I am abandoned by the

⁴⁶ Tacitus, *Annales* 14.8.4, quoted in Boyle, *Seneca: Oedipus*, lxxxii.

⁴⁷ Boyle, *Seneca: Oedipus*, lxxxii.

⁴⁸ Donald J. Mastronarde, “Seneca’s *Oedipus*: The Drama in the Word,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 101 (1970): 291–315.

⁴⁹ Maurizio Bettini and Giulio Guidorizzi, *Il mito di Edipo: Immagini e racconti dalla Grecia a oggi* (Turin: Einaudi, 2004), 180–181.

gods, the child of unholy parents, a sharer in my father's marriage-bed, and if there is any evil even beyond evil, that is the portion of Oedipus.”⁵⁰ And this is how it sounds in Seneca, from the mouth of Oedipus, who has not yet discovered the truth and is in a heavy premonition of his guilt: “Unhappy ties of kinship! I am ashamed to utter my fate. Phoebus threatens the son with his parent's bed, a monstrous marriage, an unnatural, incestuous union.”⁵¹

At this point, it is appropriate to stop arguing with Freud, especially since he will be given sufficient attention later. However, it is important to note that both the Freudian version and the interpretations of the myth of Oedipus by other scholars or critics can almost never be free from distortions or even blindness created by the personal context of the author of the interpretation, or, as the proverb says, “The tongue ever turns to the aching tooth.” This is visible, for example, in the parallel that Knox draws when comparing the ancient meanings of Sophocles’ myth of Oedipus with his own time. It is also visible in the radical position of John David Bishop, who narrows the meaning of the myth in Seneca’s tragedy exclusively to political criticism, drawing on the works of scholars of the 1960s, — a period when oppositional attitudes, and especially criticism of imperial forms of power, were part of the intellectual circles. Such distortions can hardly be eliminated completely, but by being aware of them, one can at least minimize possible bias. Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, who analyze ancient myths, for example, propose the following to address this methodological problem: “...to set up a clear-headed and strictly historical dialogue between the intention of the work and the mental habits of the interpreter. This should help to reveal the (usually unconscious) presuppositions of the modern reader and compel him to re-examine himself as regards the assumed objectivity of his interpretation.”⁵²

Following this principle, the next chapters will examine how the myth of Oedipus was understood and interpreted in the socio-political, intellectual, and creative climate of the 1960s–1970s.

⁵⁰ Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, trans. Lloyd-Jones, 467.

⁵¹ Seneca, *Oedipus*, trans. John G. Fitch, 19.

⁵² Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, “Preface to Volume I,” in *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (New York: Zone Books, 1990), 10.

Chapter Two: Oedipus in the Modern World

*And I say, since you have reproached me with my blindness,
that you have sight, but cannot see what trouble you are in...*
(Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, trans. Hugh Lloyd-Jones¹)

In the 1960s and 1970s, the world experienced several moments resembling anagnorisis. One of the most tragically intense was the culmination of the nuclear arms race between the United States, leading NATO, and the USSR as the leader of the Warsaw Pact — the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. These were 13 days of military and political escalation, when the Soviet Union placed nuclear missiles on the territory of Cuba in response to attempts by the United States to overthrow the Cuban socialist government and to the deployment of American nuclear weapons in Turkey aimed at the western territories of the Soviet Union. These less than two weeks were a time when the world was, in the literal sense, on the brink of nuclear war², and in an existential sense, for a significant number of people this became a moment of realization that with only a few missile launches humanity could destroy itself by its own hands. This was reflected in a surge of nuclear anxiety, at times reaching the level of panic.³

Another such moment — or rather a series of them — can be described as a chain reaction of protests that spread across the globe in the late 1960s and were no less shocking and transformative than the fear of nuclear war.⁴ In this chapter, the key moments of tension underlying this global protest activity will first be examined. The analysis will also consider the participants in these confrontations, their ideological and emotional backgrounds, and the responses of the state and other social institutions. These include big business, the media, and other actors that may be understood within the broader concept of power. This immersion in the socio-political and cultural context of the era will allow for a more precise understanding of the transformations that the image of Oedipus underwent at that time. These transformations will then become the subject of analysis in the second part of the chapter.

“The Whole World Is Watching!”

The quotation placed in the subtitle is a slogan chanted by people who took to the streets of Chicago for a rally against the Vietnam War in August 1968 during the Democratic National Convention. Despite the peaceful character of the rally, it was violently suppressed. At the moment when the

¹ Sophocles, *Ajax. Electra. Oedipus Tyrannus*, ed. and trans. Hugh Lloyd-Jones, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 365.

² Jeremi Suri, “The Strains of Nuclear Destruction,” in *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 7–43.

³ Tom W. Smith, “A Report: Nuclear Anxiety,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (Winter 1988): 557–575.

⁴ Suri, “The Strains of Nuclear Destruction,” 164–212.

police began beating demonstrators with batons, the protesters, aware of the presence of television crews and other media, began to chant in unison: “The whole world is watching!”⁵

This episode, like this slogan, seems highly indicative and important for reflection on the entire protest activity of the late 1960s. First, because most of these actions took place during a period of expanding access to television⁶, which indeed allowed people from different countries to observe each other’s moods and actions, to synchronize and express solidarity. Second, as many researchers of this period note, broad coverage — at least in Western media — of rallies and other forms of protest activity, including creative initiatives, in a certain sense turned anti-war activism, campaigns for liberal values, and efforts to defend the rights of previously oppressed social groups into a spectacle.⁷ On the one hand, such theatricalization⁸ required a gradual increase in eccentricity and radicalization; on the other hand, it turned protest into a new fashion.⁹

Not only this Chicago anti-war rally received wide attention. Across the Western world and beyond, protest movements multiplied. These included the 1967 riots in the United States, which emerged in defense of racial equality and in response to the continued failure to implement the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Although the Act formally abolished segregation, it did not eliminate economic inequality or police violence.¹⁰ The unrest was followed by the Holy Week Uprising in the spring of 1968, which spread across dozens of American cities after the assassination of the civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr.¹¹ In the same United States, in the second half of the 1960s, alongside mass protests against racial discrimination, the Vietnam War, and the nuclear threat, student movements demanding freedom of political activity in universities¹² were active; there was a rise of feminist actions against

⁵ Tyler Dawson, “‘The Whole World Is Watching!’ The 1968 Chicago Riots,” *Constellations* 1, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 125.

⁶ Lyn Gorman and David McLean, “Television and Consumer Societies,” in *Media and Society in the Twentieth Century: A Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2003), 126–150.

⁷ Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left*, with a new preface (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

⁸ Baz Kershaw, “Fighting in the Streets: Dramaturgies of Popular Protest, 1968–1989,” *New Theatre Quarterly* 13, no. 51 (August 1997): 255–276.

⁹ Arthur Marwick, “‘Pushing Paradigms to Their Utmost Limits,’ or ‘Creative Extremism,’” in *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c. 1958–c. 1974* (London: Bloomsbury Reader, 2012), 261–323.

¹⁰ Mark McLay, “The Republican Party and the Long, Hot Summer of 1967 in the United States,” *The Historical Journal* 61, no. 4 (December 2018): 1089–1111.

¹¹ Peter B. Levy, “The Holy Week Uprising of 1968,” in *The Great Uprising: Race Riots in Urban America during the 1960s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 153–188.

¹² Jo Freeman Hijiya, “The Free Speech Movement and the Heroic Moment,” *Journal of American Studies* 22, no. 1 (April 1988): 43–65.

the ban on abortion and discrimination against women¹³; and after a series of clashes between police and visitors to the gay bar *Stonewall Inn* in New York in 1969, representatives of sexual minorities began to express solidarity and also take to the streets in defense of their rights.¹⁴ In Great Britain, the protests of 1967–1968 were concentrated in London at Grosvenor Square around anti-war demonstrations and student uprisings demanding the democratization of education and cultural autonomy.¹⁵ In France, the culmination was May 1968 in Paris and other cities, which began with university protests against the authoritarian education system at the University of Nanterre and the Sorbonne and grew into a nationwide workers’ strike that paralyzed the country.¹⁶ In Italy, in 1967–1969, student protests directed against class inequality and the elitism of universities¹⁷, merged with the mass workers’ strikes of the Hot Autumn of 1969, caused by harsh working conditions at large industrial enterprises (FIAT)¹⁸, which subsequently, by the 1970s, led to sharp radicalization (political assassinations and terrorism — the so-called “anni di piombo”). In Japan, in 1968–1969, the Zenkyōtō movement and protests against the U.S.–Japan Security Treaty spread across the University of Tokyo and other campuses, opposing bureaucratization, American military bases, and the Vietnam War, and were harshly suppressed by the police.¹⁹ In Eastern Europe, the crisis took the form of reformist and student actions: the Prague Spring of 1968 in Czechoslovakia, which demanded “socialism with a human face,” was suppressed by the entry of Soviet troops²⁰, and student protests in Poland in March 1968 against censorship ended in repression²¹. In South America, one of the loudest and bloodiest episodes was the shooting of a student demonstration in Tlatelolco in Mexico City on October 2,

¹³ Kelsy Kretschmer, “Shifting Boundaries and Splintering Movements: Abortion Rights in the Feminist and New Right Movements,” *Sociological Forum* 29, no. 4 (December 2014): 893–915.

¹⁴ Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Suzanna M. Crage, “Movements and Memory: The Making of the Stonewall Myth,” *American Sociological Review* 71, no. 5 (October 2006): 724–751.

¹⁵ Clive Bloom, “One, Two, Three, What Are We Fighting For?” in *Violent London* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 422–442.

¹⁶ Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey, “The Dynamic of Protest: May 1968 in France,” *Journal of Socialist Theory* 36, no. 2 (2008): 201–218.

¹⁷ Stuart J. Hilwig, “The Italian Student Revolts, 1967–68,” in *Italy and 1968* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 12–33.

¹⁸ Luca Provenzano, “‘Power Is in the Streets’: Protest and Militancy in France, Italy and West Germany, 1968–1979,” *Contemporary European History* 33, no. 3 (August 2024): 909–926.

¹⁹ Licheng Nie, “From Cradle to Grave: Long-Term Influences of Campus Spatiality on the Dynamics of Japan’s Zenkyōtō Movement (1968–1969),” *Social Movement Studies*. Published online November 26, 2025.

²⁰ Martin Klimke, Joachim Scharloth, and Jacco Pekelder, *Between Prague Spring and French May: Opposition and Revolt in Europe, 1960–1980* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011).

²¹ Piotr Oseka, “Dissidents and Police: The Polish March 1968 and a Tale of Two Generations,” *East European Politics and Societies* 33, no. 4 (2019): 861–880.

1968, provoked by the authorities' fear of instability on the eve of the Olympic Games.²² It is perhaps appropriate to stop here, emphasizing that this list does not exhaust the unrest and protest activity of the period under study. These were only some of the most widely known and widely discussed events. It is now appropriate to turn to a closer examination of the ideological — that is, intellectual and cultural — climate in which these events took place, the forces that sustained them, and the actors who encouraged them.

Since this study focuses only on three countries — Italy, Japan, and the United States (in these countries the film interpretations of the Oedipus myth analyzed later were created) — it will be necessary to leave aside the dynamics in the countries of the Socialist Bloc or in South America. A more focused examination of the context of the Western world can be assisted by the book *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c.1958–c.1974* by the historian Arthur Marwick. The Japanese specificity of the world under study is explored in the book *Money, Trains, and Guillotines: Art and Revolution in 1960s Japan* by William Marotti. Given that Western films prevail in the sample of this study, it seems appropriate to continue the discussion by referring to the first source — *The Sixties* by Marwick. The special value of this book lies in the fact that it is based on the author's many years of work in the archives of the countries listed in its full title, as Marwick states in the preface.²³ Thus, many of the author's conclusions and findings, although at times formulated in a rather emotional and evaluative manner, are based on convincing evidence.

One of Marwick's key points is that the events that took place in the 1960s–1970s represent a phenomenon that is more ambiguous and complex than what is usually reduced to the formula of a crisis of the legitimacy of power and of the previous regime of knowledge. If this era is described quickly and briefly, such a formula does indeed work: it can be expressed as a crisis of trust — in institutions, expert knowledge, authorities, and the established foundations of the political order — as has already been noted several times in this study. However, in this chapter it is important to move beyond this template and examine how exactly the tensions and transformations of that time were structured. Moving beyond the template does not, however, mean rejecting it: Marwick does not deny that a crisis of legitimacy and a crisis of the previous regime of knowledge did in fact take place. From his point of view, the crisis was not so much the essence of the events as a rhetorical framework through which participants in the protests articulated their demands and justified their actions. This framework could serve as a kind of motivational fuel for a wide range of movements — from student protests for rights and university autonomy to the struggle for the rights of sexual and racial

²² Elisa Kriza, "Anti-Communism, Communism, and Anti-Interventionism in Narratives Surrounding the Student Massacre on Tlatelolco Square (Mexico, 1968)," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 38, no. 1 (January 2019): 82–96.

²³ Arthur Marwick, "Preface," in *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c. 1958–c. 1974* (London: Bloomsbury Reader, 2012), vii–ix.

minorities, women, anti-war, anti-imperialist, and anti-colonial activists. It should be noted that Marwick's position in this regard is rather radical (although not without grounds). In order not to adopt this radicalism uncritically, but at the same time to clarify its logic, I will provide an illustrative quotation:

“We now come to the most fraught field of contention when it comes to the scholarly analysis of the sixties, as well as the popular mythology [...] At its heart lies what I shall call the Great Marxisant Fallacy: the belief that the society we inhabit is the bad bourgeois society, but that, fortunately, this society is in a state of crisis, so that the good society which lies just around the corner can be easily attained if only we work systematically to destroy the language, the values, the culture, the ideology of bourgeois society. (I say ‘Marxisant’ because I am speaking of a broad metaphysical view about history and about how society works, derived from Marxism, but forming the basis for the structuralism, post-structuralism, and theories of ideology and language developed in the sixties.)”²⁴

In his book, Marwick devotes an entire chapter to the analysis of these theories and this ideology — *Pushing Paradigms to Their Utmost Limits, or Creative Extremism* — where he discusses the influence on protest movements of the work of such intellectuals as the structuralist Claude Lévi-Strauss, the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, the philosophers Herbert Marcuse, Roland Barthes, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and even (though with reservations) the media scholar Marshall McLuhan and the psychologist and advocate of psychedelic research Timothy Leary.²⁵ It should be noted that Marwick uses a rather broad interpretative framework in which he tends to view all these authors as representatives of an anti-bourgeois intellectual tradition, or, even more generally and sharply, as those whose ideas formed the basis of the “Great Marxisant Fallacy.” He justifies such a generalization by arguing that, with the accumulation and development of these ideas and the emergence of more and more interpretations, they became so closely intertwined that they began to lose nuance and move toward extremity: “In the early sixties the ideas which had been advanced in the fifties — neo Marxist, ‘structuralist’, libertarian, anti-bourgeois — began to be woven together, to reinforce each other, to be developed into ever more radical stances.”²⁶ This is a position that is strongly ideologically charged (at least anti-Marxist) and not beyond dispute. However, whatever its character, proceeding from this position Marwick leads to a very important idea — despite the fact that the external rhetoric of protest movements was loudly anti-capitalist, anti-bourgeois, anti-imperialist, anti-colonial, etc., it was possible, paradoxically, only because of the very things against which political activists fought — the global market, entrepreneurship, and the commercialization of

²⁴ Marwick, “Was There a Cultural Revolution, c. 1958–c. 1974?,” 9.

²⁵ Marwick, “‘Pushing Paradigms to Their Utmost Limits,’ or ‘Creative Extremism,’” 262.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 261.

ideas. In other words, it was made possible by capitalist instruments and the encouragement of consumerism.²⁷

It is precisely with this aspect that it is difficult to argue. Very quickly, a wide range of actors associated with counterculture gained visibility and influence. These included hippies, participants and organizers of rock festivals and underground events, as well as artists involved in happenings, performances, and exhibitions. Filmmakers of the new waves in world cinema, who often romanticized protest and countercultural values, also contributed to this trend. Alongside them were supporters of psychedelic liberation, gender and racial equality, and the rights of sexual minorities, as well as anti-war movements. Together, these groups became fashionable and, in some respects, even mainstream.²⁸ They were mainstream at least among the youth, who from 1955 to 1975 represented a significant share of the population not only in the West but also in the East due to the baby boom after the Second World War.²⁹ The popularity of this youth fashion and of protest sentiments grew rapidly thanks to the media³⁰, which gained ratings (and therefore profit) by spreading alarming news about protests or by telling stories about eccentric art projects and actions by representatives of the underground community. Television channels and the film industry began to adapt to the youth audience and to integrate into production programs and films that represented the image of young rebels, hippies, and fighters for peace and a new world order.³¹

Marwick, for his part, emphasizes the commercial spirit of the anti-capitalist ideas of the 1960s by giving the important example that the cult book among protest youth, *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) by Herbert Marcuse, which sharply criticized authority and reflected on how advanced industrial society suppresses critical thinking through comfort, consumption, and the integration of the individual into the system, was published and widely distributed with funding from the American government and the Ford Foundation.³² The cult status of *One-Dimensional Man* and Marcuse's ideas is confirmed, for example, by the fact that another active ideologist of the protest movement from the circle of young academics, the author of the concept of counterculture described in the 1968 essay *Youth and the Great Refusal*, and the author of the book *The Making of a Counter Culture* (1969),

²⁷ Marwick, "Was There a Cultural Revolution, c. 1958–c. 1974?," 12.

²⁸ Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

²⁹ Jeremi Suri, "The Language of Dissent," in *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 88.

³⁰ Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching*.

³¹ Barry Keith Grant, ed., *American Cinema of the 1960s: Themes and Variations* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008).

³² Marwick, "Was There a Cultural Revolution, c. 1958–c. 1974?," 12.

Theodore Roszak, relied on Marcuse as a key intellectual source.³³ Returning to Marwick's arguments, it is important to clarify that, by giving such examples, he hardly intended to condemn the authors and ideologists of protest for using business and government funds while promoting their anti-capitalist and state-critical ideas. In his view, many opinion leaders popular among youth at that time became, in a certain sense, businessmen, and this was normal — “entrepreneurialism, an entirely admirable quality when it does not depend on the direct exploitation of other human beings, was an indispensable ingredient in sixties change.”³⁴

Moreover, Marwick does not devalue the ideas that lay at the foundation of protest activity. He acknowledges their historical significance. In his perspective, this intellectual ferment and the rebellion connected with it became an important factor in later social changes. Beginning in the 1970s, many of these ideas did not disappear but gradually became institutionalized — they found expression in new academic fields, cultural practices, and even in changes in structures of power.³⁵ Even on an emotional level, he treats these ideas and those who advocated them with interest, recognition, and in some sense admiration, which seems to be reflected in the passages he quotes from contemporaries of the 1960s. In particular, from the British jazz singer and film and television critic of *The Observer*, George Melly:

“Pop culture and the sixties are long gone [...] Silly and transient they may have been, but at least they were alive, kicking and, above all, hopeful,”³⁶

or from the authors of essays in a collection of memoirs about the 1960s, who were still teenagers at that time and reflected on what that period gave them despite all upheavals and instability:

“It gave us tolerance for new ideas, and brought us a step nearer to equality of rights, removing many prejudices of sexual, racial and moral origin. It gave us the freedom to accept or reject things on their own merits and according to our own individual preferences. I believe that the sixties were a mini-renaissance in which the right of individual expression was encouraged, applauded and nurtured by a generation whose naive belief was that all we needed was love.”³⁷

Thus, to summarize Marwick's approach, he notes that despite the criticism of authority in the 1960s and the sometimes unjustifiably harsh measures used to suppress protests, the subsequent

³³ Theodore Roszak, “The Dialectics of Liberation: Herbert Marcuse and Norman Brown,” in *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1969), 84–123.

³⁴ Marwick, “Was There a Cultural Revolution, c. 1958–c. 1974?,” 12.

³⁵ Marwick, “If So, Why?,” 20–33.

³⁶ George Melly, *Revolt into Style* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), quoted in Marwick, “Was There a Cultural Revolution, c. 1958–c. 1974?,” 5.

³⁷ Maureen Nolan and Roma Singleton, “Mini-Renaissance,” in Sara Maitland, ed., *Very Heaven: Looking Back at the 1960s* (London: Virago, 1988), quoted in Marwick, “Was There a Cultural Revolution, c. 1958–c. 1974?,” 5–6.

liberalization and paradigm shifts in the academic sphere (the emergence of postcolonial studies, critical gender and race studies, etc.) that took place in the 1970s would not have been possible without the recognition by the state and big business of the seriousness of socio-political problems, as well as the mass character and popularity of protest culture. Recognizing this importance, in Marwick's view, leaders of states and commercial industries, on the one hand, attempted to turn the popularity of protest to their advantage, and on the other hand, calibrated their actions depending on the intensity of tensions and the level of social destabilization, guided by "measured judgements" and making decisions about concessions, which opened the way to transformations.³⁸ This position is shared by the researcher of global protest activity in the 1960s, Jeremi Suri, who emphasizes that the leaders of states affected by uprisings understood that the constant suppression of demonstrators' demands could lead to even greater escalation and therefore gradually moved toward a policy of détente, which initiated a gradual process of replacing outdated regimes of power and knowledge.³⁹ These authors described the situation mainly in the Western part of the world (although, for the sake of fairness, it should be noted that Suri pays significant attention to the countries of the Socialist Bloc, which included, for example, China). If one looks more closely at the essence of the cultural and socio-political processes that were taking place in Asia at the same time, one can observe a somewhat different dynamic.

Common Sense versus Political Activism in Japan

In this section, based on the previously mentioned book *Money, Trains, and Guillotines* by the historian William Marotti, protest activity in Japan will be examined. The author describes the suppression of the Anpo protests, which broke out in 1959 and 1960, as a turning point for the country. These were mass demonstrations against the Security Treaty with the United States, which was signed despite public unrest and expanded the American military presence in the Asia-Pacific region and, as a consequence, increased the economic and value-based influence of the United States on Japan.⁴⁰ Japan's rapid postwar economic growth, which coincided with the warming of relations with its Western ally at least at the level of diplomacy and the market, strengthened entrepreneurship, the production of consumer goods, and, accordingly, consumerism.⁴¹ Nevertheless, according to Marotti, although protest activity among the population was temporarily suppressed and — not without the

³⁸ Marwick, "Was There a Cultural Revolution, c. 1958–c. 1974?," 17.

³⁹ Jeremi Suri, "The Diplomacy and Domestic Politics of Détente," in *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 213–259.

⁴⁰ William Marotti, "Introduction," in *Money, Trains, and Guillotines: Art and Revolution in 1960s Japan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 1–8.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

efforts of the authorities and the market — dissolved in comfort and material abundance, tension was growing among Japanese artists and intellectuals of the 1960s. They refused to accept the way Japan was subordinated to the hysteria of the Cold War, “American hegemony, neoimperialism, and Fordist capitalism.”⁴² After the failure of the Anpo protests, representatives of Japan’s creative circles experienced their own anagnorisis — according to Marotti, they “discovered hidden forms of domination in the everyday world and imagined ways in which their own practices might reveal, or even transform, such systems at their point of articulation in people’s daily existence.”⁴³ These “imagined ways” took the form of several creative protest actions, which Marotti describes in his book as examples of the dynamics between authority and political activism.

Two of them are indeed quite illustrative. One of them is the action *1,000-Yen Prints* by the artist Akasegawa Genpei, which led to a court case that lasted from 1966 to 1970. In 1963, Genpei produced monochrome images of a 1,000-yen banknote in actual size, but on the reverse side they contained an invitation to his exhibition, including venue and time. According to the author’s idea, these banknotes were to circulate not as counterfeits for purchasing goods but as art objects; however, the form of money was deliberately chosen to encourage the broad public involved in the action to develop a critical attitude toward money as an instrument of power. The invitation on the reverse side of the banknote was, in essence, symbolically interpreted as a call to join this creative protest action against consumerism and the dominant capitalist values in society.⁴⁴

The second example is an inventive and ironic project entitled *Equipment Plan*, created by Imaizumi Yoshihiko, who worked under the pseudonym Nagara Tō. He developed a detailed plan for installing a giant glass guillotine in the Kōkyo-gaien garden adjacent to the Imperial Palace in Tokyo and, importantly, surrounded by posts of the Imperial Guard. According to the author’s concept, this guillotine was to become a metaphorical act of execution of the imperial system. In 1961–1962, Yoshihiko created drawings of the guillotine and a detailed technical plan for its installation; however, the action was never realized and did not even reach the stage of official approval. According to Marotti, it is precisely the impossibility of realizing the guillotine project that reveals the core of the relationship between protest activists and the state: the installation of such an object next to the Imperial Palace was unthinkable, just as rebellion against the authorities was defined by those in power as something inconceivable, inappropriate, and absurd.⁴⁵

The reaction of the authorities to both actions was not harsh in form. Even in the case of Genpei, with its long court proceedings and accusations of counterfeiting, the artist was not sentenced to

⁴² Ibid., 3.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Marotti, “The Process of Art,” 102–109.

⁴⁵ Marotti, “Beyond the Guillotine,” 207–214.

imprisonment; the case ended with the confiscation of all the banknotes he had produced and other objects from the exhibition connected with the action. The reaction was, rather, ruthless in content — in Marotti’s view, all the actions of the authorities were aimed at devaluing the projects of both artists or, in other words, removing these protest actions from the field of political expression and recoding them as a mistake, confusion, a violation of common sense, and of the accepted social order.⁴⁶

This mechanism of devaluing the meaning of the protest gesture appears to have been particularly pronounced in Japan and distinguished its model of interaction between authority and opposition. Marotti notes that this tactic of devaluing criticism of the existing regime, transmitted by Japanese officials and the police, also spread to a broad audience that agreed with the criterion of “common sense,” likely in order not to disturb an already comfortable and stable life.⁴⁷

Such a regime in Japan, in which the authorities determined what could be visible and what had to remain invisible and imperceptible (and therefore safe), continued for a long time. Even though at the end of the 1960s the left-wing radical student movement Zenkyōtō attempted direct rather than creative forms of protest and, following the wave of global demonstrations, took to the streets of Tokyo in 1968. The uprising was nevertheless suppressed by the police, and the protesters’ demands remained unmet.

The Many Faces of Oedipus in an Era of Changing Paradigms

In the 1960s–1970s, the myth of Oedipus, which since the time of Sophocles or Seneca had already been reinterpreted many times, acquired a renewed role not simply as a mythological and dramatic character. For some thinkers of the second half of the 20th century, partly already mentioned above, the myth of Oedipus became a symbol, a sign, and an instrument for the critical analysis of the relationship between authority and society, the boundaries of the norm, and regimes of knowledge. At the same time, in the works of these authors, interpretations of the myth differ significantly in their direction and intellectual purpose.

Thus, in the book *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (1955), Herbert Marcuse uses a psychoanalytic perspective to criticize repressive social organization. His reading of the myth of Oedipus reinforces ideas of resistance to the “system” and to capitalist forms of power, which became especially relevant in the 1960s. In contrast, in the essay *The Structural Study of Myth* (1955), Claude Lévi-Strauss offers a less politicized and more academic interpretation of the myth. He presents Oedipus as a clear example of the functioning of structure — a so-called basic unconscious order of the world within which the individual thinks, acts, and gives meaning to what happens around him (this basic order includes concepts of taboo, morality, and what is permitted or forbidden).

⁴⁶ Marotti, “The Vision of the Police,” 15–26.

⁴⁷ Marotti, “Introduction,” 1–5.

Despite the lesser practical orientation of Lévi-Strauss's ideas, at least in comparison with Marcuse's work, which could be described as instructions for protest action, this structuralist interpretation of the Oedipus myth also played its role in the following decades. In particular, the French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari would build their argument in the book *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972) on a critique of the structuralist approach to Oedipus, as well as, to an even greater extent, on a critique of the psychoanalytic approach.

Since the Freudian interpretation of the myth of Oedipus has been mentioned several times in passing, and the following discussion of how this myth was perceived by influential thinkers of the 1960s–1970s will often refer to it, it is appropriate to cite the text in which Freud first expressed his thoughts on Oedipus. This is his 1899 monograph *The Interpretation of Dreams*:

“If Oedipus Rex moves a modern audience no less than it did the contemporary Greek one, the explanation can only be that its effect does not lie in the contrast between destiny and human will, but is to be looked for in the particular nature of the material on which that contrast is exemplified. There must be something which makes a voice within us ready to recognize the compelling force of destiny in the Oedipus, while we can dismiss as merely arbitrary such dispositions as are laid down in [Grillparzer's] *Die Ahnfrau* or other modern tragedies of destiny. And a factor of this kind is in fact involved in the story of King Oedipus. His destiny moves us only because it might have been ours — because the oracle laid the same curse upon us before our birth as upon him. It is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father. Our dreams convince us that that is so.”⁴⁸

As can be seen, Freud refers to the lasting popularity of Sophocles' tragedy *Oedipus* at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries as indirect confirmation of his theory. In his view, the emotional response that this story evokes in audiences indicates the presence of an unconscious conflict (which was later conceptualized as the Oedipus complex⁴⁹) — a child's attraction to the mother and rivalry with the father. It is from this inner tension, Freud later argued, that feelings of guilt and shame are formed. The classicist Bernard Knox, already mentioned in the previous chapter and specializing in the study of Sophocles, saw in this interpretation a reductionism of the meaning of the tragedy and doubted that in order to move the soul of a 20th century spectator, ancient tragedy necessarily had to stir suppressed desire.⁵⁰ The fact that for more than one hundred years the interpretation proposed by Freud has remained closely connected to Oedipus, and moreover has provoked new authors to endless debates

⁴⁸ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 279–280.

⁴⁹ Freud formulated the concept of the Oedipus complex later, in 1910, in his work *Über einen besonderen Typus der Objektwahl beim Manne* (“A Special Type of Choice of Object Made by Men”).

⁵⁰ Bernard Knox, “Hero,” in *Oedipus at Thebes: Sophocles' Tragic Hero and His Time* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 5–6.

and alternative interpretations, does not necessarily strengthen Knox's position. On the other hand, the high popularity of the psychoanalytic interpretation of the myth does not provide grounds to claim that this interpretation can be extrapolated to the human being in all times, or that the ancient spectator was fascinated by Oedipus because he recognized in his story a reflection of his own unconscious desire. In other words, Knox rejected the universality of the psychoanalytic interpretation of the Oedipus myth.⁵¹ This dispute over its universality or its limitations in fact lies at the foundation of almost all the works of the second half of the 20th century that will be discussed below.

However, before turning to their analysis, it is important to make one further remark, well formulated by the classicists and anthropologists Maurizio Bettini and Giulio Guidorizzi in their book *Il mito di Edipo. Immagini e racconti dalla Grecia a oggi*:

“The ‘new’ Oedipus that takes shape in the twentieth century, however, has another father besides Freud. In the ninth chapter of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche devotes a few but significant words to him; he presents him as an example of the man who breaks social conventions and shows how wisdom is in fact a crime against nature — a path that must go beyond moral rules.”⁵²

This Nietzschean Oedipus, like the Freudian one, would also be subjected to criticism by the intellectuals under consideration, in particular in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, which at the time gained wide recognition and influence.

Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud (1955) by Herbert Marcuse

In this book, Marcuse reinterprets psychoanalytic concepts, primarily Freudian notions of Eros, guilt, shame, and the repression of impulses, referring mainly to Freud's work *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930). In that work, written several decades after his first mention of the Oedipus conflict, Freud attempts to universalize it — to describe it as a fundamental mechanism in the formation of guilt. According to Freud, guilt arises not only from committing a forbidden act but already from the very desire to break a taboo. Freud thus presents the Oedipus complex one of the key psychological foundations of human civilization.

Marcuse responds to this by transforming the Oedipus conflict. It becomes not simply a universal psychological pattern of individual development, but a model of how power is inscribed within the subject, becoming part of his inner world. He writes:

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Maurizio Bettini and Giulio Guidorizzi, “Prologo,” in *Il mito di Edipo: Immagini e racconti dalla Grecia a oggi* (Turin: Einaudi, 2004), 36. Original Italian: “Il ‘nuovo’ Edipo che prende forma nel Novecento ha però, oltre a Freud, un altro padre. Nel nono capitolo della *Nascita della tragedia*, Nietzsche gli dedica poche ma importanti parole; egli ne fa l'esempio dell'uomo che infrange le convenzioni sociali e mostra come la sapienza sia in realtà un delitto contro la natura — un percorso che deve andare al di là delle regole morali.”

“Now the ‘external restrictions’ which first the parents and then other societal agencies have imposed upon the individual are ‘introjected’ into the ego and become its ‘conscience’; henceforth, the sense of guilt — the need for punishment generated by the transgressions or by the wish to transgress these restrictions (especially in the Oedipus situation) — permeates the mental life.”⁵³

In other words, for Marcuse, Oedipus is a way to explain why civilization reproduces repression as something self-evident and psychologically justified. As a result, the individual does not simply submit to external coercion but reproduces repressive attitudes within his own psyche. For Marcuse, this is extremely important, since his social critique aims to explain not only external forms of domination but also the psychological attachment of the individual to these forms, thanks to which repressive structures appear natural and inevitable.

Marcuse further develops this idea by showing that in modern civilization the figure of the father gradually loses the status of the main bearer of prohibition. Instead, modern forms of authority and repression are concentrated in the institutions of an impersonal system: “[...] personal father-images have gradually disappeared behind the institutions. With the rationalization of the productive apparatus, with the multiplication of functions, all domination assumes the form of administration.”⁵⁴ As a result, the mechanism becomes even more stable, since it is much more difficult to resist something depersonalized than a specific figure of authority.

However, Marcuse’s most radical reinterpretation of Freudian theory is connected with his analysis of the nature of repression. While Freud regarded the repression of impulses as an important price that civilization pays for its existence, Marcuse introduces a distinction between “necessary repression” and “surplus repression”. He argues that modern society maintains forms of control that are no longer necessary for sustaining social organization but serve exclusively to reproduce domination. Marcuse calls such forms of prohibition “surplus-repression.”⁵⁵ He illustrates them through specific social institutions, such as the hierarchical division of labor, the maintenance of the monogamous patriarchal family, and public control over the private life of the individual. In his view, these institutions reinforce repressive forms of socialization and direct human energy primarily toward sustaining a productive system that benefits the state and capital.⁵⁶

As a result, Marcuse formulates a utopian thesis about the possibility of a non-repressive civilization, in which humanity could be free from discipline, repression of instincts, and the channeling of life energy associated with Eros into forced labor. In his view, this would require consuming and

⁵³ Herbert Marcuse, “The Origin of the Repressed Individual (Ontogenesis),” in *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Abingdon, Oxon, and New York: Routledge, 2023), 24.

⁵⁴ Marcuse, “The Dialectic of Civilization,” 73.

⁵⁵ Marcuse, “The Origin of the Repressed Individual (Ontogenesis),” 28.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 28–33.

producing only to the extent necessary to satisfy real needs and directing the liberated life force and energy toward personal development, creativity, and the aesthetic experience of life.⁵⁷

The Structural Study of Myth (1955) by Claude Lévi-Strauss

In the same year, 1955, Claude Lévi-Strauss reflects on the function of myth in culture. To make his argument clearer, the author refers to the myth of Oedipus, explaining his choice in a simple and direct way: “We will use the Oedipus myth which has the advantage of being well-known to everybody...”⁵⁸ At the same time, he approaches this myth not from the perspective of the popular Freudian interpretation, although Lévi-Strauss had no objection to the Freudian reading and believed that “not only Sophocles, but Freud himself, should be included among the recorded versions of the Oedipus myth”⁵⁹. For Lévi-Strauss, the myth of Oedipus was a model of logical paradoxes and contradictions that the individual encounters when entering into conflict with the universal laws by which society functions.

One of the key contradictions identified by Lévi-Strauss is connected with the tension between two competing ideas about the genesis of the human being — autochthony and birth from the union of a man and a woman. By autochthony he means the mythological idea, widespread in various cultures, according to which a person or entire peoples arise directly from the earth, nature, or primary elements, without having human parents. Lévi-Strauss demonstrates the motif of autochthony in the Oedipus myth through the story of Cadmus — the founder of the Theban royal dynasty to which Oedipus also belongs — who, after killing a dragon, sows its teeth in the ground, from which warriors emerge, representing an example of autochthonous human origin.⁶⁰ At the same time, he interprets the name and physical condition of Oedipus himself (“bleeding-foot,” “sore-foot”) as a symbol of the human being’s continued connection to the earth, noting that such motifs in myths are usually associated with beings not yet fully separated from their natural basis: “they refer to difficulties to walk and to behave straight.”⁶¹ At the same time, human experience inevitably recognizes another path of origin — the biological conception of a child by a man and a woman, which in social and cultural terms is established through systems of kinship, marriage, and prohibitions, above all the prohibition of incest.⁶²

⁵⁷ Marcuse, “Phantasy and Utopia,” 117–119.

⁵⁸ Claude Lévi-Strauss, “The Structural Study of Myth,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 68, no. 270 (October–December 1955): 432.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 435.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 433.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 434.

⁶² *Ibid.*.

Oedipus, however, kills his own father, marries his mother, and thereby destroys the distinction between generations: his children become at once his descendants and his brothers and sisters, which in turn leads to a collapse of the social logic of human genesis. In this way, Oedipus attempts to resolve the fundamental contradiction between his autochthonous and his human origin. However, this tragic resolution of the paradox, which takes place in the Oedipus myth, according to Lévi-Strauss, is necessary in order to make even more visible the insolubility and permanence of this contradiction in human life, to emphasize its universality as a fundamental structure.⁶³

Psicoanalisi della guerra (1966) by Franco Fornari

In 1974, the book *Psicoanalisi della guerra* by the Italian psychiatrist Franco Fornari was translated into English (*The Psychoanalysis of War*) and gained wide popularity during the wave of mass protests, fatigue from the Vietnam War, and the constant tension created by the Cold War and the nuclear arms race.

Fornari turns to the Freudian Oedipus complex and argues that the psychic structures underlying it operate not only at the level of individual psychology but also at the level of the collective unconscious, shaping the way societies experience and justify war. According to Fornari, war functions as a kind of defense mechanism that allows a group to cope with an unbearable sense of guilt and loss.⁶⁴ It is important to note that this sense of guilt does not arise from some collective wrongdoing — as in the individual Oedipus complex, it emerges from unconscious structures of the psyche connected with love, dependency, aggression, and the fear of destroying or losing a vital object (in the individual case, the mother; in the collective case, the homeland). In these circumstances, “war is a security organization not because it permits us to defend ourselves from real enemies, but because it succeeds in finding, or in extreme cases, in inventing, real enemies to kill...”⁶⁵ Through this logic, Fornari strengthens the extrapolation of family Oedipal dynamics to the collective level: society experiences itself as a child who must protect the “mother” — that is the homeland — while the enemy symbolically occupies the position of the father, who must be destroyed.⁶⁶

In Fornari’s view, this mythological scheme was universal and functioned in the pre-nuclear era, but in the modern world everything has become more complex. Under conditions in which nuclear weapons exist, “we can no longer cure our madness with war,”⁶⁷ the author argues, since the destruction of the enemy at the same time implies the possible destruction of all humanity.

⁶³ Ibid., 440-444.

⁶⁴ Franco Fornari, “Introduction,” in *The Psychoanalysis of War*, trans. Alenka Pfeifer (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1974), vii–xxxii.

⁶⁵ Fornari, “Introduction,” xvi.

⁶⁶ Fornari, “Reflections on the Nuclear Era,” 228.

⁶⁷ Fornari, “Introduction,” xix.

For this reason, according to Fornari, humanity must abandon the unconscious displacement of its own aggression onto the enemy and accept personal and collective responsibility for the desire for war, because “...it is we ourselves who desire war, and the alienation of our aggressiveness into the state serves us simply to be able to say that it is not we who desire war but that the state forces us to make war”.⁶⁸ The systemic solution to this problem, in Fornari’s opinion, could be the creation of a new paradigm of social relations, extended to the global level, which he calls the “Omega institution.” The essence of this new form of social contract is that it should be capable of prohibiting war at the collective level in the same way that internal law prohibits homicide at the individual level.⁶⁹

Il desiderio dissidente (1968) by Elvio Fachinelli

Another expansion of the psychoanalytic interpretation of the myth of Oedipus was proposed by the Italian psychoanalyst Elvio Fachinelli in the essay *Il desiderio dissidente*, published in February 1968 — at the peak of student protest activity in Italy.

Fachinelli notes that the conflict between the youth taking to the streets and authority is almost automatically reduced to the familiar Freudian model of Oedipus, in which the child confronts the authoritarian father:

“The protest sign that towers above all the others reads: “struggle against repression.” It is now clear that this repression is different in Naples and in Berlin, and that Turin is not Madrid, nor even Berkeley. Yet since it is a young man — or an adolescent — who carries that sign, the discourse on repression immediately evokes the problem of paternal authority. It almost seems as though that young man is brandishing the specter of a powerful and authoritarian father who must be overthrown.”⁷⁰

However, according to the author, such a transfer would be a mistake. Fachinelli supports his argument about the inappropriateness of applying the Freudian model to this situation by referring to recent psychoanalytic practice and sociological observations. This empirical evidence, according to Fachinelli, shows that the figure of the father in the modern family and society is losing its former symbolic strength as an authoritarian head.⁷¹ Accordingly, the Oedipal model of rivalry between child and father, in its original meaning, becomes outdated.

⁶⁸ Fornari, “Reflections on the Nuclear Era,” 199.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 216-218.

⁷⁰ Elvio Fachinelli, “Il desiderio dissidente,” *Costruzioni psicoanalitiche* 8, no. 15 (2008): 134. Original Italian: “Il cartello di protesta che sovrasta tutti gli altri porta scritto: lotta alla repressione. Ora è chiaro che questa è diversa a Napoli e a Berlino, e Torino non è Madrid e nemmeno Berkeley. Ma dal momento che è un giovane, o un adolescente, che porta quel cartello, il discorso sulla repressione rimanda immediatamente al problema dell’ autorità paterna. Sembra quasi che quel giovane agiti il fantasma di un padre potente e autoritario che dev’ essere abbattuto.”

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

The author continues by arguing that today the triangular relations of the Freudian model (father–mother–child) are increasingly replaced by a bipolar connection between mother and child.⁷² This new psychic structure, in turn, can be extended to the collective level, where the figure of the mother in bipolar relations is replaced by society, whose tactic is not to prohibit but to absorb the subject through security and the satisfaction of needs. Since “liberation from *need* indeed seems to have as its condition the renunciation of *desire*,”⁷³ this also provokes conflict. It is precisely this conflict, according to Fachinelli, that lay at the foundation of the student revolts at the turn of the 1960s–1970s. Here the Freudian Oedipal situation is transformed — it ceases to be a struggle for forbidden pleasure and becomes a struggle to preserve subjectivity and the capacity to desire.

By desire, Fachinelli does not mean simply the wish to obtain something. Desire is a state of the subject that motivates growth and openness to the future, even if the subject does not yet see a way to satisfy it. Thus, depriving the individual (and, together with him, the collective) of desire by offering ready-made solutions and shifting attention to the satisfaction of needs means depriving him of development.⁷⁴

Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia (1972) by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari

The defense of the concept of desire, although interpreted in their own way, was also developed by the French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their work *Capitalisme et schizophrénie. L'anti-Oedipe (Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia)*. As noted above, they also referred to the psychoanalytic model of the Oedipus complex. However, unlike Fachinelli or Fornari, they did not expand or transform it — these authors chose the path of opposing this model, as the title of their book, *Anti-Oedipus*, clearly indicates.

Deleuze and Guattari argue that the Oedipus complex is not a natural or original structure of the human psyche. On the contrary, it arises as a historically conditioned form of repression of desire, which the family, the state, and commercial organizations use as an instrument of power in order to subordinate the individual:

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., 136. Original Italian: “la liberazione dal *bisogno* sembra anzi avere come sua condizione la rinuncia al *desiderio*.”

⁷⁴ Ibid., 137-139.

“It is often thought that Oedipus is an easy subject to deal with, something perfectly obvious, a ‘given’ that is there from the very beginning. But that is not so at all: Oedipus presupposes a fantastic repression of desiring-machines”.⁷⁵

This quotation is presented here in order to introduce and explain the term “desiring-machines,” proposed by the authors, which constitutes their specific interpretation of the concept of desire and becomes a key concept of the book. “Desiring-machines” are not a feeling, not a craving, not a need, and not a fantasy. They are sets of elements, similar to gears or machines, that work together as a larger mechanism and lead to the production of some benefit or valuable result. An example of such a mechanism, in their view, is the feeding of an infant, where “the breast is a machine that produces milk, and the mouth a machine coupled to it”:⁷⁶ the infant who desires to eat; the mother who hears the cry and responds in order to satisfy this desire; the pleasure and development that follow when the infant receives what is desired — all of this is the coordinated operation of several “desiring-machines.” At the same time, desire does not arise from lack (“Desire does not lack anything.”⁷⁷). It does not originate in trauma or prohibition, which, in their view, is imposed by the concept of the Oedipus complex. Desire is primary and universal. It arises from the very process of life, which itself is an endless process of production and reproduction.⁷⁸

In the authors’ view, the idea that desire emerges from lack or from prohibition that generates guilt — as is assumed in a framework where the Freudian Oedipus complex is considered fundamental — as well as the explanation of desire through the universalization of the incest taboo characteristic of structuralism, or Nietzsche’s genealogical model that links subjectivity with an original crime and internal guilt — all of this replaces the productive nature of desire with something else. In these models, desire becomes dependent on law, prohibition, or lack, whereas the authors insist on its positive and productive character. As a result, Oedipus functions as a form of belief, “injected into the unconscious,” through which social repression is internalized, and the subject begins to perceive his own subordination as natural.⁷⁹

In the conclusion of their work, Deleuze and Guattari propose freeing the “desiring-machines” from the Oedipal model in order to allow their positive productive energy to operate directly, without the

⁷⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “The Desiring-Machines,” in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane, preface by Michel Foucault (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 3.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 26-27.

⁷⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, “Psychoanalysis and Familialism: The Holy Family,” 106.

constraints of control and subordination, which do not strengthen the potential of “desiring-machines” but only suppress it.⁸⁰

The Anatomy of Dependence (1971) by Takeo Doi

Since this study examines the transformations of the myth of Oedipus also in the context of Japan in the 1960s–1970s, it is appropriate to refer to one of the significant books of this period — *The Anatomy of Dependence* by the psychoanalyst Takeo Doi.

The author does not reject the Western psychoanalytic tradition; on the contrary, he works within it, attempting to combine it with Japanese cultural specificity. For example, he introduces the concept of “amae,” emphasizing that it is a widespread psychological experience. Specifically, it is a form of basic emotional dependence that emerges in a person even before the tension of the Oedipus conflict becomes activated. The author explains that “amae” corresponds to “that tender emotion that, arising in earliest infancy, was labeled by Freud ‘the child's primary object-choice.’”⁸¹

Doi further develops his explanation, adding that “amae” persists in later life as a need to be accepted or to be treated with unconditional love, or as a form of pleasant dependence and a desire for closeness in which another person allows one to rely on them. Such dependence usually arises in the relationship with the mother, and in this light “amae” is generally experienced as an “attempt psychologically to deny the fact of separation from the mother.”⁸² The father as a figure, and the confrontation with him that is characteristic of the Oedipus situation, becomes a problem as the child grows older. But, according to Doi, it transforms not so much into direct rivalry with the father as into a conflict between generations.⁸³

Doi argues that in Japanese culture, however, both the maternal figure and society as a whole — if one transfers the concepts of “amae” and the Oedipus complex to the collective level — tend to smooth over this conflict, maintaining relations of fusion and minimizing sharp separation. In this context, the idea of a “fatherless society” gains appeal as a model to be realized. This concept does not imply the literal absence of the father, but rather a cultural tendency to bypass the paternal principle as a bearer of prohibition and conflict.⁸⁴

However, in the author’s view, this attempt “to avoid the Oedipus situation by denying the father without clashing with him in actuality”⁸⁵ is fraught with regression for both the individual and society

⁸⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, “Introduction to Schizoanalysis,” 347.

⁸¹ Takeo Doi, “The First Idea of Amai,” in *The Anatomy of Dependence*, trans. John Bester (Tokyo, New York, and San Francisco: Kodansha International, 1981), 20.

⁸² Doi, “The Logic of Amai,” 75.

⁸³ Doi, “Amai and Modern Society,” 143.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 150-157.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 158.

as a whole. This is because the capacity to endure conflict and tension resiliently is denied in such a society, whereas this ability is one of the key and necessary conditions of development.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Ibid., 165.

Chapter Three: Oedipus on the Big Screen

— *Io voglio sapere, finalmente, chi sono!*

— *In nome di dio, non fare ricerche... se ami la vita.*

(Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Edipo Re*, scenario¹)

Socio-political upheavals, and the shift in value orientations and paradigms of knowledge described in the previous chapter, created a noticeable ripple effect in the sphere of cinema as well. According to a number of film historians, in particular David Bordwell and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, after the 1950s a trend toward so-called “art cinema” emerged in different countries around the world.² As a consequence, a specific category of viewers appeared, referred to as the “art cinema audience.”³

Researchers include in art films both the works of various New Waves of world cinema (French, German, Swedish, Polish, Hungarian, Japanese, and others), as well as films of the New Hollywood and Italian auteur cinema after the period of neorealism.⁴ At this point, it is important to clarify the degree to which common features are shared among these cinematic movements. It is also necessary to define the boundaries of similarities and differences, in order not to create the impression that the different socio-cultural contexts of these countries, the different systems of financing the film industry, the different cinematic languages, and the various ways of cinematic reflection on events taking place within the country and in the world did not matter. On the contrary, all of these factors were extremely important. They ensured that world cinema of the 1960s–1970s was not one single large New Wave, but rather a set of new waves or new movements, each with its own national specificities. Understanding these similarities and differences will be useful for a more thoughtful analysis of the films that are the focus of this research.

David Bordwell in his 1979 essay *The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice* argues that “films produced in such various cultural contexts might share fundamentally similar features.”⁵ He further strengthens this point: “we can usefully consider the ‘art cinema’ as a distinct mode of film practice, possessing a definite historical existence, a set of formal conventions, and implicit viewing procedures,”⁶ and he proposes to examine the most significant similarities.

¹ Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo; Edipo re; Medea*, introd. Morando Morandini (Milano: Garzanti Libri, 2014), 422.

² David Bordwell, “The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice,” *Film Criticism* 4, no. 1 (Fall 1979): 56.

³ Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, “Introduction,” in *Making Waves: New Cinemas of the 1960s*, rev. and expanded ed. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1–15.

⁵ Bordwell, “The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice,” 56.

⁶ *Ibid.*

The first common formal convention identified by the author is the weakening of the sequential logic of event development: “the art cinema defines itself explicitly against the classical narrative mode, and especially against the cause-effect linkage of events. These linkages become looser, more tenuous in the art film.”⁷ How this appears directly in a motion picture can be observed in the films analyzed in this study. This is especially clearly demonstrated by *Edipo Re* (1967) by Pier Paolo Pasolini and *Funeral Parade of Roses* (1969) by Toshio Matsumoto.

The second similar feature, according to David Bordwell, is psychologically complex and often aimless characters. Comparing the new protagonist of the 1960s with the main hero of the previous decade (particularly in American cinema), the author notes: “The Hollywood protagonist speeds directly toward the target; lacking a goal, the art-film character slides passively from one situation to another.”⁸ When reflecting on this feature in relation to the cinematic image of Oedipus, one might initially doubt that Oedipus is the type of character that reproduces such a convention. In the interpretations of Oedipus discussed earlier — for example, in Sophocles — the hero is not a passive figure. As emphasized in the first chapter, according to Bernard Knox, the tragedy of Sophocles is not a tragedy of fate.⁹ In the philosophical and psychoanalytic interpretations of the second half of the 20th century, which were the focus of the previous chapter, Oedipus also appears as an active character — a fighter for his own desire.

However, a more attentive analysis of specific films that represent Oedipus shows that this activity of the hero — sometimes reaching hyperactivity, an intense and almost obsessive striving toward something — may in fact be only the reverse side of aimlessness, loss, and a kind of drifting. The hero becomes carried away by forces that exceed him: sometimes by fate (as in the image of Oedipus in Seneca), sometimes by the unconscious (in the interpretation of Freud), and sometimes by his own blind conviction in human omnipotence (which brings him closer to the Oedipus of Sophocles in the interpretation of Knox). According to Bordwell, such aimlessness of the hero results in “a certain drifting episodic quality to the art film’s narrative”.¹⁰

The third feature that unites different national cinematic movements of the late 1960s–1970s under the general category of art cinema is the emphasis on the author, the author’s vision, and the author’s interpretation: “the author becomes a formal component, the overriding intelligence organizing the film to our comprehension.”¹¹

⁷ Ibid., 57.

⁸ Ibid., 58.

⁹ Bernard Knox, “Chapter One: Hero,” in *Oedipus at Thebes: Sophocles’ Tragic Hero and His Time* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 6.

¹⁰ Bordwell, “The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice,” 58.

¹¹ Ibid., 59.

Touching briefly on the topic of viewing procedures, Bordwell also argues that, in relation to auteur cinema, the viewer develops the habit to “watch less for the tale than the telling.”¹² A particular approach to interpreting art films also appears: “we first seek realistic motivation [...] If we’re thwarted, we next seek authorial motivation. (What is being ‘said’ here? What significance justifies the violation of the norm?) Ideally, the film hesitates, suggesting character subjectivity, life’s untidiness, and author’s vision.”¹³

The next convention identified by David Bordwell is ambiguity. This ambiguity may relate to many aspects of the film: to the image of the main character; to the situation in which the character finds himself; to the decisions he makes; to the solution he seemingly discovers; and so on. “The art film creates the occasion for maximizing ambiguity,”¹⁴ states Bordwell. This emphasis on visible, explicit, and almost tangible ambiguity closely connects the cinema of the late 1960s–1970s with ancient tragedy. Recalling the words of Jean-Pierre Vernant mentioned in the first chapter, ambiguity was a key characteristic of the tragic character. Moreover, according to him, the story of Oedipus was “an extreme case of ambiguity.”¹⁵ For this reason, the revival of Oedipus in the cinema of that period seems to further intensify the cinematic emphasis on ambiguity described by Bordwell.

Finally, the last element that connects the cinema of different countries during the period under study is the trend toward open endings. This tendency further strengthened ambiguity and almost turned it into a fundamental element of films of that time. As Bordwell writes: “With the open and arbitrary ending, the art film reasserts that ambiguity is the dominant principle of intelligibility.”¹⁶

David Bordwell explains the emergence of these similarities between different national waves of cinema, Italian auteur cinema, and New Hollywood in rather practical terms. He sees the key reason in the globalization of the film industry and the increase in intercultural exchange in cinema after the decline of Old Hollywood’s dominant position. After 1948, the so-called Paramount Decrees came into force in the United States. This decision prohibited major film studios (Paramount Pictures, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, RKO Pictures, Warner Brothers, and Twentieth Century Fox)¹⁷ from controlling all elements of the film industry: production, distribution, and ownership of cinemas. This antitrust decision, together with other factors — such as the growing competition between cinema

¹² Ibid., 60.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Jean-Pierre Vernant, “Oedipus in Athens,” in *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (New York: Zone Books, 1990), 321.

¹⁶ Bordwell, “The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice,” 60.

¹⁷ Ernest Borneman, “United States versus Hollywood: The Case Study of an Antitrust Suit,” in *The American Film Industry*, ed. Tino Balio (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

and the increasingly popular medium of television — led to instability in the American film distribution system and a decline in production. These problems were addressed in part through the acquisition of completed foreign works, primarily European, as well as through financial support for European film production.¹⁸ European film studios, of course, willingly agreed to co-productions and to expanding their national audiences into a broader international audience.¹⁹ Such globalization of cinema required a certain alignment of different national approaches in order to capture a common trend that would be attractive to a newly expanded audience. According to Bordwell, this trend became art cinema.²⁰

Another film scholar, the already mentioned Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, also notes many similarities among European, American, and Asian films of the 1960s–1970s²¹. He also applies the term “art cinema” to the films of the New Waves of world cinema and to Italian auteur cinema. However, while acknowledging these similarities, he also emphasizes the importance of differences.

Nowell-Smith also notes that art cinema was only one segment of the overall film production of that time. It was an important and significant segment, but it did not eliminate the existence of mainstream cinema, which continued to be produced according to established conventions. This is an important point. It allows us to look at the past in a more balanced way. Auteur films, the cinema of the New Waves, and New Hollywood certainly created a revolution in film production and film viewing. However, this revolution was still rather limited. After all, films are “commercial products and the art film market, although expanding, was not large enough on its own to support more than a few films.”²²

Thus, among the similarities between art films of different countries, Nowell-Smith first of all emphasizes the low-budget character of such cinema. “The new cinemas were on the whole poor cinemas,”²³ writes the author. According to him, this poverty went hand in hand with a certain imperfection of these films. This imperfection included the participation of non-professional actors; street shooting with handheld cameras instead of the expensive use of studio facilities; and the violation of technical conventions in framing, editing, and other aspects of filmmaking.

This imperfection was conceptualized by the directors of art cinema of the 1960s themselves as a rebellion against the “false perfection” of the cinema of the previous decade. As a result of this

¹⁸ Ibid., 56–57.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Nowell-Smith, “Introduction,” in *Making Waves*, 1–15.

²² Nowell-Smith, “World Cinema in the 1950s,” in *Making Waves*, 26.

²³ Nowell-Smith, “Introduction,” in *Making Waves*, 3.

conceptualization, imperfection turned into an advantage and into a recognizable stylistic feature of art films, which to some extent united the new cinema of different countries.

According to the author, another extremely important feature of art cinema was connected with this cult of imperfection. This feature was a rethinking of realism in cinema. Nowell-Smith emphasizes precisely the transformation of the attitude toward realism. In the early 1960s, directors of different New Waves shared a common impulse to capture life as it is, to shoot on location, and to record everyday environments. Later, however, this approach changed radically.

Among the directors of art cinema who wished “to break radically with realism,”²⁴ and who therefore “had very much to plough their own furrow,”²⁵ the author primarily names: “Nagisa Oshima in Japan, Alain Resnais and Chris Marker in France, and Federico Fellini in Italy. They were followed by Roman Polanski (but only after he left Poland), Pier Paolo Pasolini in Italy, and Alexander Kluge in Germany.”²⁶

Without specifying why Nowell-Smith constructed exactly this sequence of directors and their rejection of realism, it is worth noting that the films by two of the listed authors analyzed in this study (Pasolini and Polanski) will serve as clear illustrations of this deliberate and deeply authorial departure from realism.

Another important feature that unites art films from around the world, according to Nowell-Smith, is the orientation of this cinema primarily toward a youth audience. This was not only because the post-war boom dramatically increased this segment of the audience, but also because the growing spread of television changed viewing habits. At least in the United States, more and more adults preferred to watch television at home instead of going to movie theaters. Meanwhile, young people who sought entertainment outside the home became the target audience of the new low-budget film studios.²⁷

The focus on youth inevitably influenced the content of the films used to attract their attention. Because this period was marked by protest movements, whose main participants were teenagers and young adults — as described in detail in the previous chapter — cinema at times addressed socio-political problems. However, as Nowell-Smith strongly emphasizes, the level of politicization differed significantly from country to country.

Thus, New Hollywood “steered studiously clear of anything to do with the war in Vietnam, whether the fighting on the ground or the rising tide of protest at home.”²⁸ According to Nowell-Smith, only

²⁴ Nowell-Smith, “Criticism and Culture,” in *Making Waves*, 40.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Nowell-Smith, “World Cinema in the 1950s,” in *Making Waves*, 21–22.

²⁸ Nowell-Smith, “New Cinemas, New Politics,” in *Making Waves*, 52.

a few such films appeared during the 1960s.²⁹ In his opinion, the more active romanticization of rebels and marginal figures began only in the 1970s, and this was “just playing catch-up.”³⁰ In particular, the film *Chinatown* by Roman Polanski, which is analyzed below and which, according to a number of scholars, contains an indirect but nevertheless noticeable critique of capitalism and power³¹, was released in 1974. This occurred precisely during the period when, according to Nowell-Smith, New Hollywood was catching up in its representation of socially tense themes.

In Europe, beginning already in the 1960s, protest and politicization were literally embedded in the aesthetics of cinema.³² There, as Nowell-Smith notes, “the counter-culture was weaker but regular left-wing political movements a lot stronger.”³³ However, from country to country this protest aesthetics also had its own differences. In some places it was explicit; in others it was indirect and referred less to specific political events and more to a broader social and cultural critique of modernity.

An example of direct and rather radical protest can be found in the French New Wave. The anti-war sentiments that were characteristic of the 1960s “were important not only in their own right but also as a catalyst for a wider wave of youthful radicalism.”³⁴ In particular, references to this protest activity are “scattered through the films of Jean-Luc Godard in the mid-1960s.”³⁵

In Italy, however, social critique was expressed differently. It was more indirect and more metaphorical. One of the main oppositional figures of Italian new cinema, according to Nowell-Smith, was Pier Paolo Pasolini: “In the late 1950s Italy was desperately in need of dissenting voices, and Pasolini provided one.”³⁶

At the same time, his dissenting voice never directly discussed Vietnam, student protests, or even workers’ rights. As Geoffrey Nowell-Smith notes:

“The irreducible core of Pasolini’s critique of modern society was a profound sense that the world, and individuals in the world, had lost their innocence. If innocence survived it was to be looked for among the subproletariat, or in the Third World, and if, as Pasolini suspected, it was no longer to be

²⁹ Ibid., 53.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Mary-Kay Gamel, “An American Tragedy: *Chinatown*,” in *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema*, ed. Martin M. Winkler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 166.

³² Nowell-Smith, “New Cinemas, New Politics,” in *Making Waves*, 53.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Nowell-Smith, “Pasolini,” in *Making Waves*, 211.

found anywhere in the present then it could be imagined as something located in the past — in the Middle Ages, or in pre-history — which could be imaginatively recreated through film.”³⁷

This important observation highlights a distinctive feature of the protest aesthetics of one of the leading directors of Italian art cinema of the 1960s–1970s. This feature is the metaphorical character of his critique, as well as the use of revived archetypal and archaic images, mythological references, and ancient narrative structures as expressive means. His film *Edipo Re* (1967), which is analyzed below, is a particularly clear example of such an indirect reflection on the problems of modernity.

Returning to other similarities and differences of art cinema in different countries, Nowell-Smith also notes another important tendency. Although each country — and often each individual director — had its own distinctive aesthetic, the active development of film festival culture (Venice, Cannes, Berlin) inevitably led to a certain synchronization of different New Waves.³⁸ This could be seen, for example, in the choice of themes (such as the representation of protesting youth, marginalized groups, and socially disadvantaged populations) or in the choice of technical approaches (location shooting, handheld cameras, synchronous sound).

The countries that hosted these festivals (Italy, France, Germany) were, in a certain sense, trendsetters. New cinema that appeared on the so-called periphery — which Nowell-Smith, for example, includes Japan and Latin America — was often compelled “to look to the centre for validation.”³⁹ This was because reputation and “access to markets were gained and lost at European Festivals.”⁴⁰

Such synchronization of the Japanese New Wave with Western art cinema is also confirmed by the scholar of Asian cinema David Desser in his 1988 book *Eros Plus Massacre: An Introduction to the Japanese New Wave Cinema*:

“At virtually the same time in the United States, Great Britain, France, and Japan, the national consciousness turned toward a suddenly new social class, one not previously identified, let alone perceived as having, or being, a problem. [...] in the '60s youth was dominant. Perhaps nowhere was this clearer than in the cinema.”⁴¹

He also notes that many films of the Japanese New Wave “take an overtly political stance,”⁴² and that “certain Japanese filmmakers used cinema as a tool, a weapon in a cultural struggle.”⁴³ In particular,

³⁷ Ibid., 213.

³⁸ Nowell-Smith, “Introduction,” in *Making Waves*, 14.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ David Desser, “Cruel Stories of Youth,” in *Eros Plus Massacre: An Introduction to the Japanese New Wave Cinema* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 39.

⁴² Desser, “Introduction,” in *Eros Plus Massacre*, 4.

⁴³ Ibid., 3.

he includes among such protest films the cinematic interpretation of the myth of Oedipus that is the focus of this thesis — the first feature film by Toshio Matsumoto, *Funeral Parade of Roses* (1969).⁴⁴ Thus, the trend toward the critique of old paradigms of power and knowledge, as well as reflection on the crisis of modernity, became part of the “set of formal conventions” of the new cinema of the 1960s–1970s across the world.

This confirms the central hypothesis of the present study: the choice by directors of ambivalent protagonists, specific artistic techniques, and references to archetypal images can be understood as a particular response to the socio-political and intellectual climate of their time.

In this context, it is now appropriate to move to a more detailed analysis of Oedipus on the big screen — namely, such cinematic interpretations of the myth as *Edipo Re* (1967) by Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Funeral Parade of Roses* (1969) by Toshio Matsumoto, and *Chinatown* (1974) by Roman Polanski — in order to examine, through these films, whether such a resonance can be confirmed or refuted. One of the criteria for testing the hypothesis, among others, may be the degree of convergence or divergence between the forms of social critique presented in these works and their nationally specific forms, identified earlier in this chapter. In the case of Pasolini (anticipating the analysis), it can be observed that the thesis highlighted by Nowell-Smith — namely that Italian auteur cinema, despite its oppositional character, often expressed critique not directly but allegorically, through symbol, sign, archetype, or structure — indeed finds reflection in the artistic strategy of *Edipo Re*, where the appeal to myth becomes a way of indirectly speaking about modernity.

Pasolini’s View of Oedipus Beyond Politics and the Radicalization of Freud

This section is devoted to the analysis of Pierre Paolo Pasolini’s interpretation of the Oedipal tragedy, as presented in his film *Edipo Re* (1967). It examines how deeply the director’s reading of the Oedipus myth engages with both the ancient and the psychoanalytic interpretations, while also moving beyond them. It further considers how this authorial vision relates to the social and intellectual climate of the late 1960s. However, before turning directly to the analysis of the film, it is useful to take a closer look at the author’s background.

Assembling the image of Pier Paolo Pasolini from different sources — his poetry and novels, his interviews, essays, and speeches at film festivals, his movies, and memoirs about him, in particular the book *Vita di Pasolini* (1978) by his contemporary and friend Enzo Siciliano — one can see that his personality is marked by contradiction and otherness. Contradiction here should not be understood as inconsistency, but rather as complexity. Otherness should not be understood as detachment from

⁴⁴ Desser, “Ruined Maps: Identity, Sexuality, and Revolution,” in *Eros Plus Massacre*, 96.

modernity, but as an inability to fit into any single pattern or identity. This emphasis on the ambiguity, complexity, and otherness of Pasolini's figure is important for the analysis of his cinema. As will be shown below in this section, if these features are not taken into account, there is a risk of interpreting his work — and specifically *Edipo Re*.

For context, it is important to note that Pier Paolo Pasolini did not have formal training as a film director. He graduated from the Department of Literature at the University of Bologna and was initially known as a poet and novelist.⁴⁵ However, despite his philological education, an important stage in Pasolini's intellectual development was his attendance at lectures on art history by Roberto Longhi.⁴⁶ This period helped shape his knowledge of visual culture, which he later applied in his work in cinema.

Pasolini came from the family of a military officer who was a convinced fascist and a schoolteacher who did not share her husband's political views. Despite the absence of open disputes between his parents, as Enzo Siciliano notes while recounting Pasolini's own memories, a sense of disagreement and conflict was present between them.⁴⁷ Pasolini himself, already in his youth, was closer in his views to his mother. This closeness concerned not only political views but also a deep bond of trust between them.⁴⁸

Pasolini spent a significant part of his youth in his mother's native home in Friuli.⁴⁹ He wrote poems in the Friulian dialect and was inspired by the distinctive local Friulian culture, which was not marked by the idea of a unified Italian nation.⁵⁰ It is likely that this attraction to innocence, naturalness, and purity later extended to his sincere interest in the subproletariat and the lumpenproletariat.

In 1947, two years after graduating from university, Pier Paolo Pasolini joined the Italian Communist Party.⁵¹ However, a few years later, after his homosexuality became known, he was expelled from the party.⁵² Despite this expulsion, Pasolini continued to share communist ideas. He deeply respected the philosopher and founder of the party, Antonio Gramsci, to whom in 1957 he dedicated the poetry collection *Le ceneri di Gramsci*⁵³. At the same time, he always experienced “a conflict between the Marxist idea that the ‘simple’ people must be redeemed from their naive philosophy of common sense

⁴⁵ Enzo Siciliano, “Epos friulano,” in *Vita di Pasolini* (Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 2005), 115–16.

⁴⁶ Siciliano, “Il tempo dell'Analogica,” in *Vita di Pasolini*, 59.

⁴⁷ Siciliano, “Tal cour di un frut,” in *Vita di Pasolini*, 48.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 47–48.

⁴⁹ Siciliano, “Il tempo dell'Analogica,” in *Vita di Pasolini*, 54.

⁵⁰ Siciliano, “La ‘pura luce’ della Resistenza,” in *Vita di Pasolini*, 80–87.

⁵¹ Siciliano, “Epos friulano,” in *Vita di Pasolini*, 121.

⁵² Siciliano, “Come in un romanzo,” in *Vita di Pasolini*, 160–61.

⁵³ Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Le ceneri di Gramsci. Poemetti* (Milano: Garzanti, 1957).

and led toward a higher conception of the world, and the Catholic idea that instead regards that philosophy as a value in itself, an absolute given.”⁵⁴

Pasolini carried this conflict throughout his entire creative and personal life. Moreover, this contradiction was complicated by his awareness of his own distance from the naive peasant and subproletarian culture that he admired so deeply. This distance resulted from his origin in a family that could be described as part of the lower middle class (“piccola borghesia”).⁵⁵

In 1950 Pasolini moved to Rome, where he became acquainted with circles of intellectuals and filmmakers in the capital.⁵⁶ There he wrote his first screenplays. In 1961 he directed his first full-length feature film, *Accattone*, about an idle man from the Roman slums. The role was played by the non-professional actor and subproletarian Franco Citti, whom Pasolini introduced to film audiences and effectively turned into an actor.⁵⁷ The social status of the actor, as well as his debut role in *Accattone*, are important for the analysis of *Edipo Re*. It was Citti who became the main protagonist of that film and therefore the embodiment of Pasolini’s interpretation of the myth.

Pasolini directed the film *Edipo Re* in 1967. It was the sixth feature film of the director and the first based on ancient mythology. Despite the direct reference to the myth of Oedipus and the preservation of key elements of the classical tragedy — primarily its Greek version written by Sophocles — such as the emphasis on Oedipus’s swollen feet, the killing of the father, the marriage with the mother, the insight of the blind Tiresias and the blindness of the seeing Oedipus, the suicide of Jocasta, and the self-blinding of Oedipus, the film can hardly be described as an adaptation of the classical work. It was a substantial authorial reinterpretation of the ancient plot.

In particular, ancient or archaic time was mixed with the modern. The beginning and the end of the film depict 20th century Italy. The middle part of the film refers to the time of the myth, to the main narrative elements and characters of the classical tragedy. However, as Pasolini himself explained:

“After all, Sophocles himself was as far removed from the age of Oedipus — whose date is not even clearly known — as we are today. I have merely tried to reconstruct a plausible archaic age, but without any historical delimitation.”⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Siciliano, “Scoperta di Roma,” in *Vita di Pasolini*, 193. Original Italian: “un conflitto esso é fra l’idea marxista che i ‘semplici’ debbano venir riscattati dalla loro filosofia ingenua del senso comune per una superiore concezione del mondo; e l’idea cattolica, che quella filosofia considera invece un valore in sé, un dato assoluto.”

⁵⁵ Siciliano, “Epos friulano,” in *Vita di Pasolini*, 147.

⁵⁶ Siciliano, “Scoperta di Roma,” in *Vita di Pasolini*, 179–180.

⁵⁷ Siciliano, “Cinema,” in *Vita di Pasolini*, 259–263.

⁵⁸ A.N.S.A. (Servizio Italiano), telegram, Venice Lido, Settembre 3, 1967, “Mostra cinematografica di Venezia,” Archivio del Fondo Pier Paolo Pasolini, Bologna, Italy. Original Italian: “Del resto lo stesso Sofocle era lontano dall’età di Edipo, che non si sa nemmeno bene quale sia, più o meno come lo siamo noi oggi. Io ho solo cercato di ricostruire un’età arcaica verosimile, ma senza alcuna delimitazione storica.”

For this reason, the sequences set in Thebes were filmed not in Greece, the homeland of the tragedy, but in Morocco, where the director saw “an archaic pre-industrial civilization.”⁵⁹ Pasolini explained his choice of unusual and exotic costumes in the same way. They were intended to embody what he described as “barbaric arbitrariness.”⁶⁰

This approach — playing with time and mixing modern Italian reality with archaic elements and a mythological narrative — confused many contemporary critics of Pasolini. In September 1967, *Edipo Re* was presented at the Venice Film Festival. The film did not receive any award in any category. This even led to a scandal initiated by the disappointed Alfredo Bini, Pasolini’s producer and the founder of the film studio Arco Film, which had produced the film. On the final day of the festival, a discussion unfolded between him and the festival director Luigi Chiarini. This exchange was documented in telegrams of the information agency *ANSA*:

“I agree with Chiarini’s statements,” Bini said, “which in essence confirm — albeit somewhat awkwardly — my own statements. In fact, I never said that he had subordinated the jury; I said that this year he had chosen a jury suited to his intention of awarding Bunuel.”⁶¹

“[...] I cannot help thinking that a jury that completely ignores Pasolini cannot be entirely acting in good faith.”⁶²

“I understand,” Professor Chiarini concluded, “that every father thinks his son is the most handsome in the world, and therefore I will not respond to Bini’s remark that a jury which completely ignores Pasolini is not entirely acting in good faith. It is precisely the case of the student who has failed and accuses the teacher of committing injustices.”⁶³

⁵⁹ “Paese Sera,” Rome, Giugno 7, 1967, Fondo Pier Paolo Pasolini, Bologna. Original Italian: “una civiltà arcaica pre-industriale.”

⁶⁰ A.N.S.A. (Servizio Italiano), telegram, Venice Lido, Settembre 3, 1967, Fondo Pier Paolo Pasolini, Bologna. Original Italian: “barbarico arbitrario.”

⁶¹ A.N.S.A. (Servizio Italiano), telegram, Venice Lido, Settembre 8, 1967, Fondo Pier Paolo Pasolini, Bologna. Original Italian: “Sono d’accordo con le dichiarazioni di Chiarini — ha detto Bini — che in sostanza confermano, sia pure in modo imbarazzato, le mie dichiarazioni. Infatti, non ho mai detto che egli ha subordinato la giuria ma ho detto che quest’anno aveva scelto una giuria adatta alla sua intenzione di premiare Bunuel.”

⁶² Ibid. Original Italian: “[...] non posso fare a meno di pensare che una giuria che ignora completamente Pasolini non sia completamente in buona fede.”

⁶³ Ibid. Original Italian: “Capisco — ha concluso il prof. Chiarini — che ogni padre pensi che suo figlio è il più bello del mondo e quindi non rispondo alla frase di Bini il quale pensa che una giuria che ignora completamente Pasolini non sia una giuria completamente in buona fede. È proprio il caso del ragazzo bocciato che accusa il maestro di commettere delle ingiustizie.”

“[...] I do not believe that a student such as Pier Paolo Pasolini can allow himself to be judged by a professor such as Chiarini.”⁶⁴ — Bini replied.

As Pasolini’s contemporary Nico Naldini notes: “In September, there is great anticipation at the Venice Film Festival, but after the screening the audience and critics leave bewildered. While in Italy it remains the least understood of Pasolini’s films, it will achieve great success abroad, especially in France and Japan.”⁶⁵ The influence of *Edipo Re* in Japan will be discussed in the next section, where the film *Funeral Parade of Roses* (1969) by Toshio Matsumoto will be analyzed. At this point, it is appropriate to move to a detailed analysis of the content of *Edipo Re*, about which one reviewer remarked that the “film is at once Pasolini’s worst and his best.”⁶⁶

As noted above, the first part of the film depicts modern Italy. However, if we recall the very first shot that appears immediately after the opening credits, it becomes clear that Pasolini’s play with time and allegory begins already at this point. This shot shows a stone sign with the inscription Thebes (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. A stone sign pointing toward Thebes in the very first scene of the film.

A few seconds later, the film cuts to landscapes of Northern Italy at the beginning of the 20th century — the place and time where Pier Paolo Pasolini himself was born. This editing shapes the viewer’s perception of the unfolding events. After the appearance of the inscription “Thebes”, everything that

⁶⁴ Ibid. Original Italian: “[...] non credo che un alunno come Pier Paolo Pasolini possa farsi giudicare da un professore come Chiarini.”

⁶⁵ Nico Naldini, “Cronologia,” in *Per il cinema*, by Pier Paolo Pasolini, vol. 1, ed. Walter Siti and Franco Zabagli (Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 2001), CI. Original Italian: “In settembre alla Mostra di Venezia c’è grande attesa ma dopo la proiezione pubblico e critici escono disorientati. Mentre in Italia resta il ‘meno compreso’ dei film di Pasolini, avrà un grande successo all’estero, specie in Francia e in Giappone.”

⁶⁶ Sergio Frosali, “Attraverso il mito di Sofocle l’infelicità dell’uomo moderno,” *La Nazione* (Firenze), Settembre 14, 1967, Fondo Pier Paolo Pasolini, Bologna. Original Italian: “film è insieme il peggiore e il migliore di Pasolini.”

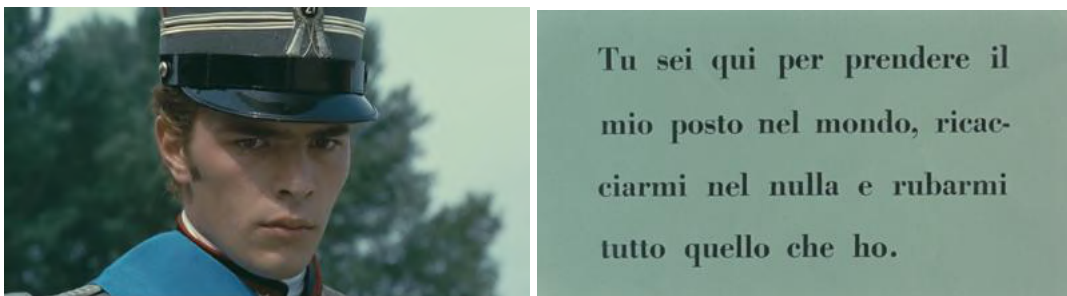
follows in the subsequent shots — even though the action unfolds in a modern setting — inevitably becomes associated with the myth of Oedipus, the king of Thebes.

In the following shots, the viewer sees the countryside and houses that the director himself described in the screenplay as houses of the “piccola borghesia”.⁶⁷ In one of these houses, a woman played by Silvana Mangano — who, after another temporal shift in the film, will also appear in the role of Jocasta — gives birth to a child. What follows is a sequence of idyllic images. The mother rests with the child in nature, walks along a line of poplar trees, and sits on a green meadow in what appears to be complete serenity while breastfeeding her infant. At this moment, however, a close-up of the actress’s face reveals a change in emotion — from calmness to an inexplicable anxiety. This shift creates tension and once again reminds the viewer that the fate of this mother and child is somehow connected to the tragedy of Oedipus (Figs. 2-3).



Fig. 2. The mother from the opening scene, which depicts modern Italy, breastfeeds the child and looks at the camera with serenity. **Fig. 3.** A moment later, anxiety appears on her face.

The connection becomes entirely evident when the father appears in the frame and remains alone with the child. These shots are interspersed with intertitles that convey the father’s monologue. He is overcome by the fear that the son will take away the woman he loves and her love (Figs. 4-7). The child reacts to the father’s heavy gaze by crying.



⁶⁷ Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo; Edipo re; Medea*, introd. Morando Morandini (Milano: Garzanti Libri, 2014), 343.



E la prima cosa che mi ruberai sarà lei, la donna che io amo... Anzi già mi rubi il suo amore!

Figs. 4–7. The father-soldier of the fascist army from the opening scene looks tensely at his son. His thoughts are conveyed through intertitles.

It is noteworthy that the father appears in the image of a soldier wearing the uniform of a Benito Mussolini's army. Another important detail is that the father of the infant is played by Luciano Bartoli, who later appears in the role of Laius, the father of Oedipus.

The final and also rather explicit reference to the connection between modern time and antiquity, and to the tragic story of Oedipus, can be seen in the shots that function as a transition from one epoch to another. First, the modern father enters the infant's room and, standing over the cradle, harshly grabs the child by the legs (Figs. 8-9).



Fig. 8. The father from the opening scene walks into his son's room. **Fig. 9.** The father roughly grabs the child by the legs.

A few seconds later, Moroccan landscapes appear, representing the surroundings of ancient Thebes. There, a shepherd, the servant of Laius, carries the infant Oedipus, tied to a stick by his hands and feet. After that, another shepherd removes the ropes from the swollen feet of Oedipus and takes him away to Corinth (Figs. 10-11).



Fig. 10. The servant of Laius carries the newborn Oedipus. **Fig. 11.** A shepherd from Corinth unties Oedipus's feet and takes the child with him.

The close intertwining of modernity with the classical myth was expressed by the director not only through cinematic language and artistic devices. He spoke about it directly during the final stages of filming in July 1967, when he addressed journalists regarding the possible inclusion of *Edipo Re* in the competition program of the 28th Venice International Film Festival:

“The tragedy of Oedipus,” Pasolini states, “is a dramatic warning addressed to human beings of all times, but more particularly to contemporary man.”⁶⁸

A little later, in August 1967, when the film had already been completed, Pier Paolo Pasolini explained in a large interview with the magazine *Sette Giorni* that he attempted to portray the connection between the tragedy of Oedipus and modern man through autobiographical elements, and more specifically through a Freudian interpretation of the myth related to his personal history:

“However, in *Edipo*, yes — in the first part, essentially — there was a recollection of my childhood, and a very clear one as well.”⁶⁹

[...]

“That is, I recounted events from my own life, generalizing them, however, and extending them somewhat to everyone; in this sense the film has a Freudian ideology.”⁷⁰

In this light, it becomes entirely clear why the location chosen for filming the opening of *Edipo Re* was a small town in Northern Italy that resembles the places where Pasolini spent his childhood. It also explains why the father of the infant is dressed in the uniform of a soldier of the fascist army, just as the director’s own father once was. It also clarifies why Pasolini emphasized in the screenplay that the family depicted on screen belongs to the “piccola borghesia,” a class that he hated and to which he nevertheless belonged.

Nonetheless, as Pasolini later explained in other interviews, the psychoanalytic interpretation of the myth of Oedipus was not simply reproduced by him but was seriously rethought:

“I wanted to make the film very freely. When I made it, I had two objectives in mind: first, to present a sort of autobiography, completely metaphorical and therefore mythologized; second, to address both

⁶⁸ “Gli italiani a Venezia,” *Nazione Sera* (Firenze), II^a ed., 17 luglio 1967, Fondo Pier Paolo Pasolini, Bologna. Original Italian: “La tragedia di Edipo — afferma Pasolini — è il drammatico monito rivolto all’uomo di tutti i tempi, ma più particolarmente all’uomo contemporaneo.”

⁶⁹ Gaetano Stucchi, “Una lucida passione: ‘Ho parlato poco di me e me ne pento.’ Intervista a Pier Paolo Pasolini,” *Sette Giorni in Italia e nel mondo*, no. 11, 27 agosto 1967, Fondo Pier Paolo Pasolini, Bologna. Original Italian: “Però in ‘Edipo’, sì, nella prima parte, in fondo, c’era una rievocazione della mia infanzia, e molto chiara anche.”

⁷⁰ Ibid. Original Italian: “Cioè ho raccontato delle vicende mie, generalizzandole, però, ed estendendole un po’ a tutti, e in questo senso il film ha un’ideologia freudiana.”

the problem of psychoanalysis and that of myth. But instead of projecting myth onto psychoanalysis, I re-projected psychoanalysis onto myth. This was the fundamental operation in *Edipo*.”⁷¹

In fact, such a profound reinterpretation of the classical myth took place during the period in which Pier Paolo Pasolini worked. This is confirmed by the overview of the changing images of Oedipus in the works of intellectuals of the second half of the 20th century presented in the second chapter of this thesis. The strong authorial contribution to this new interpretation also corresponds to the characteristics of art cinema of the 1960s–1970s listed at the beginning of this chapter.

Thus, in what ways is Pasolini’s Oedipus similar to the ancient Oedipus, and in what ways does he differ? What connects this interpretation with the Freudian reading of the myth, and what allows us to say that Pasolini moved beyond it?

First, Pasolini’s Oedipus, unlike the Oedipus of Sophocles or Seneca, whose image was discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, cannot be called an intellectual.⁷² Unlike the classical Oedipus, he has no reason to be proud of his intellect. His actions are reckless, impulsive, and sometimes even base. For example, in the scenes depicting his life in Corinth, in the family of his adoptive parents Polybus and Merope, there is an episode in which he cheats during a discus-throwing competition. This is how it is presented in the screenplay:

“Quick as a thief, on the tip of his foot, he pushes the disc past the little branch, and meanwhile he shouts, jumping and dancing, as if to conceal the malicious movement of his foot.
OEDIPUS

I have won! I have won!”⁷³

When his rival accuses Oedipus of cheating, Oedipus attacks him with his fists.

In general, the film presents a strongly emphasized and almost demonstrative lack of restraint in Oedipus’s behavior. This sharpness in his reactions differs radically from the impulsiveness of the Oedipus described in the first chapter of this thesis. There, with reference to the classicist Bernard

⁷¹ Pier Paolo Pasolini, intervista con Oswald Stack, quoted in David Ballerini, *Edipo Re e Medea di Pier Paolo Pasolini: mito, visione e storia di due sfortune*, 1^a ed., edizione Kindle (2012), loc. 567–582. Original Italian: “Volevo fare il film molto liberamente. Quando lo realizzai avevo in mente due obiettivi: primo, presentare una sorta di autobiografia, completamente metaforica e quindi mitizzata; secondo, affrontare sia il problema della psicanalisi sia quello del mito. Ma anziché proiettare il mito sulla psicanalisi, riproiettai la psicanalisi sul mito. Fu questa l’operazione fondamentale in *Edipo*.”

⁷² Massimo Fusillo, “Edipo Re: L’obbligo di conoscere,” in *La Grecia secondo Pasolini: Mito e cinema*, nuova ed. (Roma: Carocci editore, 2022), 35–38.

⁷³ Pasolini, *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo; Edipo re; Medea*, 362. Original Italian: “Svelto come un ladro, con la punta del piede, spinge il disco oltre il ramoscello, e intanto grida, saltando e ballando, come per nascondere il movimento maligno del suo piede.

EDIPO

Ho vinto! Ho vinto!”

Knox, the portrait of Sophocles' Oedipus was discussed. The impulsiveness of the ancient Oedipus was the reverse side of his self-confidence and readiness for decisive action. Yes, at one moment it clouded his judgment and led him to kill the old man on the road, who was his father Laius. However, this was the only occasion on which the classical Oedipus used such fierce physical violence. Pasolini's Oedipus, by contrast, constantly reacts with force and physical aggression to anything he perceives as a threat. In addition to beating his rival in the discus competition, this is also demonstrated in the long scene in which Oedipus violently kills all the guards accompanying the chariot of Laius, as well as Laius himself (Figs. 12-17).



Figs. 12–14. Oedipus fiercely attacks the guards of Laius's chariot. **Figs. 15–17.** Oedipus brutally kills Laius.

At the same time, such a representation of Oedipus's extreme emotions and rage refers to the visual tradition of depicting Oedipus that existed in antiquity (Figs. 18 and 19) and to pathos formulas (*Pathosformeln*) — that is, to ancient patterns of exaggerated and intensified mimicry, as well as physical and psychological expressiveness.⁷⁴ These were often conveyed not only through facial expressions but also through gestures (for example, hands raised upward to strike) and through the

⁷⁴ Carlo Ginzburg, "From Aby Warburg to E. H. Gombrich: A Problem of Method," in *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 19–20.

depiction of movement in clothing and hair. According to Aby Warburg, whose ideas were discussed in the methodological section of this thesis, pathos formulas functioned as a kind of vehicle that transported classical images from antiquity into later periods, ensuring their afterlife (*Nachleben*).



Fig. 18. Scene in which Oedipus attacks Laius. Fragment of a marble sarcophagus. First half of the 3rd century AD, Vatican Museums.



Fig. 19. Scene in which Oedipus kills Laius. Fragment of a fresco. 2nd century AD, Egyptian Museum Cairo.

There is no convincing evidence to claim that Pasolini deliberately attempted to recreate the ancient visual representation of Oedipus. However, this possibility cannot be dismissed either, especially considering his serious interest in the history of visual art mentioned earlier in connection with his attendance at the lectures of the art historian Roberto Longhi.

The anger and immediate use of physical force by Pasolini's Oedipus also appear in the scenes depicting his victory over the Sphinx, who terrorized Thebes. This episode, incidentally, creates a strong contrast with the classical tragedy. On the one hand, the ancient Oedipus was presented by both Sophocles and Seneca as a wise man who defeated the Sphinx by solving its riddles — something no other mortal was able to do. Pasolini's Oedipus, on the other hand, refuses even to listen to the riddles of the Sphinx. Instead, he immediately attacks the creature with a sword and defeats it by force rather than by intellect (Figs. 20–21).



Fig. 20. The Sphinx terrorizing Thebes. **Fig. 21.** Oedipus attacks the Sphinx with a sword.

The cruelty of Oedipus in the film, as well as his fear of hearing the truth, is also demonstrated in the scene with the blind prophet Tiresias. Oedipus is offended by Tiresias's hints that he may be the son and the murderer of Laius. He roughly grabs the blind man and drags him toward the gates of Thebes in order to drive him away. When Tiresias finally pronounces the prophecy openly, Oedipus has already turned his back to him and no longer listens to the old man (Figs. 22-25).



Fig. 22. Oedipus grabs Tiresias and drags him outside the city. **Fig. 23.** A boy from the crowd catches Tiresias and helps him leave. **Fig. 24.** Tiresias openly calls Oedipus the son and the murderer of Laius. **Fig. 25.** Oedipus turns his back on Tiresias and does not listen to the accusation.

In general, it should be noted that the motif of the radicalization of passions, which runs through the entire film *Edipo Re*, connects it not only with the visual imagery of antiquity, which was characterized by exaggerated emotions. This motif of excess and extremity of feelings was also a characteristic feature of both political activism and the sphere of art in the 1960s–1970s, as noted earlier in the section “*The Whole World Is Watching!*” This trend is concisely and effectively emphasized by a contemporary of that period, the art historian and philosopher Susan Sontag. In her essay *Film and Theatre* (1966), which was written as both a critique and a development of the reflections of Erwin Panofsky on cinema — specifically his 1934 work *Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures*⁷⁵ — Sontag notes the following: “Every interesting aesthetic tendency now is a species of radicalism.”⁷⁶

Returning to the characteristics of Pasolini’s Oedipus and their comparison with the classical image, it is important to highlight another device used by the director that demonstrates Oedipus’s recklessness and his refusal to take responsibility for his life. When Oedipus leaves Corinth after learning that he is destined to kill his father and engage in a sexual relationship with his mother, he encounters a crossroads with a stone sign three times along the way. Each time he chooses his path by surrendering himself to fate. Oedipus closes his eyes while standing before the stone, spins around, and then walks in the direction in which his feet are pointing — and each time his feet point toward Thebes (Figs. 26–27).



Fig. 26. Oedipus closes his eyes and spins at the crossroads, relying on fate to choose his path. **Fig. 27.** Fate directs Oedipus toward Thebes.

In essence, Pasolini thus turns his film into a tragedy of fate. This interpretation becomes entirely evident if one takes into account that at the time of the film’s production — and even during its screening at the Venice Film Festival in 1967 — its working title was *Edipo, il figlio della fortuna*.⁷⁷ The classicist Bernard Knox, as already noted several times, strongly disagreed with such an

⁷⁵ Erwin Panofsky, “Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures,” *Bulletin of the Department of Art and Archaeology of Princeton*, June 1936.

⁷⁶ Susan Sontag, “Film and Theatre,” in *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1981), 119.

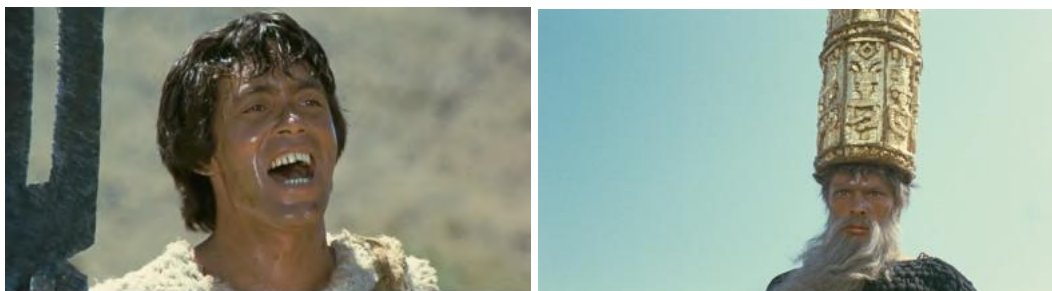
⁷⁷ “Gli italiani a Venezia,” *Nazione Sera* (Firenze), II^a ed., 17 luglio 1967, Fondo Pier Paolo Pasolini, Bologna. The original Italian title of the film, *Edipo, il figlio della fortuna*, could be translated as “Oedipus, the Son of Fortune.”

interpretation of the tragedy of Oedipus, and specifically with its positioning as a tragedy of fate. His central argument on this issue, presented in the first chapter of this thesis, was that the Oedipus of Sophocles was responsible for his own fate at every step. His tragedy resulted from his personal choices and his own will. More broadly, according to Knox, the tendency of modern audiences to interpret the myth of Oedipus as a tragedy of fate was facilitated by the popularity of the psychoanalytic interpretation of the myth, in which fate becomes equivalent to the unconscious.⁷⁸

At this point, it is appropriate to examine more closely the similarities and differences between Pasolini's Oedipus and the Freudian interpretation. The emphasis on rivalry between father and son, as well as on the passionate attraction to the mother — features characteristic of the psychoanalytic reading — are quite clearly represented in the film. Several examples may illustrate this.

First, the film includes an anxious dream experienced by Oedipus, which pushes him to visit the oracle of Apollo in order to obtain its interpretation. From the oracle, the hero learns that he is destined to kill his father and to have an incestuous relationship with his mother. In the classical tragedy, such a dream does not appear. Without doubt, this addition is connected with what Pasolini described as the re-projection of psychoanalysis onto the myth. As it should be remembered, Freud himself supported the existence of the Oedipus complex by referring to dreams in which people see themselves having sexual relations with their parents.⁷⁹

Second, in the scene where Laius and Oedipus meet on the road, the motif of rivalry between father and son is clearly present. This meeting recalls a scene from the opening part of the film, where the father-soldier looks threateningly at his small son, who cannot endure this gaze and begins to cry. In the part of the film that directly represents the myth, Oedipus's father Laius wears “an exaggeratedly tall crown to over-emphasize his phallic role”⁸⁰ and looks at Oedipus with contempt. Oedipus, however, no longer fears the anger of the paternal figure and instead mocks him (Figs. 28–29).



⁷⁸ Bernard Knox, “Hero,” in *Oedipus at Thebes: Sophocles' Tragic Hero and His Time* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 5–6.

⁷⁹ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 279–280.

⁸⁰ Kriss Ravetto-Biagioli, “Theory by Other Means: Pasolini's Cinema of the Unthought,” *International Social Science Journal*, August 2014, 105.

Fig. 28. Scene of the meeting between Oedipus and Laius on the road to Thebes: Oedipus laughs at Laius's arrogance. **Fig. 29.** In the same scene, Laius looks at the traveler Oedipus with contempt.

Finally, the strong connection between Pasolini's version of the Oedipus story and the Freudian interpretation can be seen in the way the relationship between Oedipus and Jocasta is depicted. If we recall the ancient texts of the tragedy of Oedipus, they do not include scenes of passion, tenderness, or any form of loving affection between these characters. In Pasolini's film, however, Oedipus and Jocasta passionately desire each other. Perhaps the most radical representation of their passion appears in the scene where they both begin to suspect that the prophecies of Tiresias and the oracle of Apollo about their kinship may be true. At first, they discuss this possibility in horror. Then, still in a state of confusion, they make love (Figs. 30–31).



Fig. 30. Oedipus and Jocasta discuss the possibility that their relationship may indeed be incestuous.

Fig. 31. Jocasta begins to suspect that Oedipus may be her son but does not stop his kisses.

It is noteworthy that in the published version of the screenplay, Pasolini presents this scene differently:

“Oedipus once again draws Jocasta into his arms. And his hand, out of an old conjugal habit, moves toward the large brooch that fastens Jocasta's garment on her shoulder. But just as mechanically, and driven by a new instinct — more violent than anything else — Jocasta's hand also rises and, covering it, pushes Oedipus's hand away from the brooch.

[...]

Then Jocasta pulls away from Oedipus and withdraws, her step almost a flight.”⁸¹

It appears that, during the course of filming, Pasolini decided to radicalize the Freudian interpretation, portraying the attraction between Oedipus and Jocasta as an irresistible force — one that cannot be

⁸¹ Pasolini, *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo; Edipo re; Medea*, 418. Original Italian: “Edipo stringe di nuovo tra le braccia Giocasta. E la sua mano, per una vecchia abitudine di sposo, va alla grande spilla che regge la veste sulla spalla di Giocasta. Ma altrettanto meccanicamente, per un istinto nuovo e più violento di ogni altra cosa, anche la mano di Giocasta si alza, e scosta dalla spilla, coprendola, la mano di Edipo.

[...]

Poi Giocasta si stacca da Edipo e si allontana con un passo che è quasi di fuga.”

opposed under any circumstances. This is, in fact, fully consistent with the way his reworking of psychoanalytic ideas has been described in the scholarly literature. In particular, Silvia De Laude, in her article *Pasolini e Freud* (2023), characterizes Pasolini's use of Freudian concepts as "spregiudicato" (uninhibited).⁸²

What, then, constitutes the authorial move beyond the Freudian family triangle of father–mother–child? It can be seen in the blurring of the boundary between the individual unconscious and collective fate, which appears in the final part of the film. At this point the director once again makes a leap in time and narration. This occurs when Oedipus, after blinding himself, leaves the palace and meets a boy named Angelo. The boy offers him a flute and his hand as a sign that he is ready to guide him. Only a few seconds later, Oedipus, now dressed in modern clothing, walks through the streets of Bologna, through the industrial zones of Milan, and through the rural landscapes of Northern Italy at the end of the 1960s (Figs. 32-33).



Fig. 32. After blinding himself, Oedipus leaves Thebes, supported by his guide Angelo. **Fig. 33.** Final scene. Angelo and Oedipus in modern Italy.

In this modern setting, he is still guided by the same Angelo. Oedipus, filled with sorrow and repentance, begins to play the flute for the people:

“The melody is that of a song from the Risorgimento (or revolutions?) of the bourgeoisie, from the struggles for freedom. Along the thread of that melody, everything around it acquires its own meaning [...]

Students passing by with their books. Beautiful girls of the city, along the porticoes. A mother with a child in her arms, an affluent mother, with all the dignity of that afternoon and of that morning [...]
The events, the gestures, the steps, the glances of what is one of the thousand hours in which humanity finds itself again, with its laziness and its anxiety, its fateful going.”⁸³

⁸² Silvia De Laude, “Pasolini e Freud,” *Syzetesis* 10 (2023), 214.

⁸³ Pasolini, *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo; Edipo re; Medea*, 432. Original Italian: “La melodia è quella di un canto di risorgimenti (o rivolgimenti?) borghesi, delle lotte per la libertà. Al filo di quella melodia, tutto ciò che è lì intorno, acquista un suo senso [...]

Studenti che passano coi libri. Belle ragazze della città, lungo i portici. Una madre col bambino in braccio, una madre benestante, con tutta la sua dignità di quel pomeriggio e di quella mattina [...]

This is how Pier Paolo Pasolini himself describes the scene in the screenplay of the film.

Oedipus finds a form of calm when he returns to the same place where the film begins — the same meadow where, in the opening sequence, a happy mother walked with her newborn child. At this moment, the film ends with the phrase: “life ends where it begins.”⁸⁴

As mentioned earlier, when *Edipo Re* appeared on the big screen, it provoked confusion and dissatisfaction among viewers. Some film critics pointed to the complex dialectics of the film, the unclear position of the author, and its insufficient level of political engagement:

“Hence the uncertainty and even stylistic contradiction of the film; hence its flavor of a notebook of notes and hypotheses, perhaps in search — in a forthcoming work (novel, poem, film?) — of that ideological aggressiveness that the author has lost.”⁸⁵

“[...] the film is important in Pasolini’s career because it marks his return to the themes most dear to his poetry, his distancing from political and ideological suggestions.”⁸⁶

“The screenplay of *Edipo Re* [...] as a document of the ‘engaged’ artist, aggressive in committing himself and in confessing himself.”⁸⁷

This departure from politics and class struggle was felt particularly strongly also because Oedipus was played by Franco Citti, who in 1967 was still closely associated with the lumpen-proletarian character from the recent film *Accattone*. In that film, Pasolini had romanticized marginal figures such as Accattone and, as the director himself claimed, clearly expressed his “hatred of the bourgeoisie.”⁸⁸ Pasolini’s Oedipus, however, was neither a marginal and declassed figure nor purely a representative of the upper class. He was the quintessence of ambiguity. The director’s own attitude

I fatti, i gesti, i passi, gli sguardi di quella che è una delle mille ore in cui l’umanità si ritrova, con la sua pigrizia e il suo affanno, il suo fatale andare.”

⁸⁴ A.N.S.A. (Servizio Italiano), telegram, Venice Lido, September 3, 1967, Archivio del Fondo Pier Paolo Pasolini, Bologna. Original Italian: “la vita finisce dove comincia.”

⁸⁵ A.T., “Il film di Pasolini verso l’uomo,” *Vie Nuove*, 21 settembre 1967, Fondo Pier Paolo Pasolini, Bologna. Original Italian: “Di qui la incertezza e contraddizione anche stilistica del film, di qui il suo sapore di libro di appunti e di ipotesi, alla ricerca, forse, in una prossima opera (romanzo, poema, film?) di quella aggressività ideologica che l’autore ha perduto.”

⁸⁶ Vice, articolo in *Corriere d’informazione*, 18–19 settembre 1967, Fondo Pier Paolo Pasolini, Bologna. Original Italian: “[...] il film è importante nella carriera di Pasolini perché segna il suo ritorno ai temi prediletti della poesia, il suo distaccarsi dalle suggestioni politiche e ideologiche.”

⁸⁷ Ferdinando Giannessi, “‘Edipo Re’ di Pasolini,” *La Stampa*, 20 settembre 1967, Fondo Pier Paolo Pasolini, Bologna. Original Italian: “La sceneggiatura di *Edipo Re* [...] come documento dell’artista ‘impegnato’, aggressivo nel compromettersi e nel confessarsi.”

⁸⁸ Gaetano Stucchi, “Una lucida passione: ‘Ho parlato poco di me e me ne penito.’ Intervista a Pier Paolo Pasolini,” *Sette Giorni in Italia e nel mondo*, no. 11, 27 agosto 1967, Fondo Pier Paolo Pasolini, Bologna. Original Italian: “odio verso la borghesia.”

toward the character was also ambiguous. Pasolini portrayed Oedipus as an uncontrolled and irrational barbarian, yet at the same time he did not consider reason itself to be a virtue. In one interview given shortly after the filming of *Edipo Re*, he spoke about his attitude toward reason in the following way:

“[...] I am in a moment of hatred toward reason.”⁸⁹

“[...] reason is replaced by common sense, that is, the worst thing in the world.”⁹⁰

Other viewers were disturbed by this incomprehensible and contradictory Oedipus. A reader of the magazine *Cinema Nuovo*, for example, projected this fear onto contemporary society. His note was published in the September issue of the journal in 1967:

“In this way, Pasolini’s Oedipus would seem a more ‘modern’ character, more problematically contemporary, and in any case no less condemnable. But perhaps this is precisely a time of Oedipuses of this kind (moreover, so bestially contradictory, crushed between love and hatred, violence and compassion, impiety and contrition).”⁹¹

Some contemporary scholars nevertheless see *Edipo Re* precisely as a political statement. For example, Kriss Ravetto-Biagioli, a professor of film, television and digital media at University of California, analyzes the film *Edipo Re* and finds similarities between Pasolini’s interpretation of the myth and the anti-Freudian and anti-capitalist reading proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.⁹² In general, it should be noted that the temptation to interpret the director’s work in this way is understandable. First, in several of his other films Pasolini expressed ideas of class struggle quite directly, as can be seen from the quotation cited above. Second, in the second half of the 20th century there was indeed a noticeable left-radical trend in intellectual interpretations of the myth of Oedipus, as described in the previous chapter.

However, if we consider the cultural foundations that informed Pier Paolo Pasolini during the making of *Edipo Re*, and rely on his own statements and essays, it appears that these foundations were to a greater extent psychoanalytic in nature. This is suggested, for instance, by the following statement by the director: “I had in fact read all of Freud in Bologna [...] more than twenty years earlier — an act

⁸⁹ Ibid. Original Italian: “[...] sono in un momento di odio verso la ragione.”

⁹⁰ Ibid. Original Italian: “[...] la ragione viene sostituita dal buon senso, cioè la cosa peggiore del mondo.”

⁹¹ Domenico Acconci, “Pasolini e il mito di Edipo,” *Cinema Nuovo*, n. 189 (settembre 1967), “Lettere al direttore,” Fondo Pier Paolo Pasolini, Bologna. Original Italian: “In tal modo l’Edipo di Pasolini sembrerebbe un personaggio più ‘moderno’, più problematicamente attuale, comunque non meno condannabile. Ma forse questo è proprio un tempo di Edipi di questo genere (per di più così bestialmente contraddittori, schiacciati fra amore e odio, violenza e compassione, empietà e contrizione).”

⁹² Ravetto-Biagioli, “Theory by Other Means,” 93–109.

that was fundamental to my culture and to my life.”⁹³ At the same time, they were also shaped by anthropological and structuralist perspectives. This interpretation is supported, in particular, by Pasolini’s own reflections in one of his articles for the weekly magazine *Tempo*, to which he contributed between 1972 and 1975:

“There are intellectuals who do not know the meaning of the expression ‘folk culture’; or they fail to distinguish it from ‘culture’ in the historical sense, that of the dominant class; or they give the adjective ‘folk’ the connotation typical of the communist press, where it means something entirely different and is in any case never linked to the word ‘culture’ (except in some particular context). It is hardly surprising that these intellectuals of ours are unfamiliar with De Martino or with the scholarly texts of ethnology. All their intellectual zeal seems to be exhausted in the few obligatory literary and journalistic readings. Linguistics and ethnology are carefully ignored. But Lévi-Strauss! And structuralism! Were they not supposed to be obligatory as well?”⁹⁴

Thus, the director’s attempt to place Oedipus within the timeless context of an archaic pre-industrial civilization — deliberately endowing him with the traits of a “wild,” natural human being who relies on fate and external divine forces — and then transferring this image into modernity, also suggests that Pasolini was attempting to express an idea close to the works of Lévi-Strauss on myth.⁹⁵ In this perspective, myth appears not so much as a story or narration but as a universal structure that organizes the interaction of human beings with themselves and with the external world. Emerging in the archaic era as an integral element of folk culture, this structure continues to shape human ways of thinking and acting in modernity as well.

⁹³ Pier Paolo Pasolini, quoted in Silvia De Laude, “Pasolini e Freud,” *Syzetesis* 10 (2023), 212, citing N. Naldini, *Al lettore nuovo di Pasolini*, in *Un paese di temporali e di primule*, ed. N. Naldini (Parma: Guanda, 1993), 22. Original Italian: “tutto Freud l’avevo appunto letto a Bologna [...] vent’anni fa e più, atto fondamentale della mia cultura e della mia vita.”

⁹⁴ Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Descrizioni di descrizioni*, ed. Graziella Chiarocossi (Milano: Garzanti, 1996), 350–51. Original Italian: “Ci sono degli intellettuali che non conoscono il significato dell’espressione ‘cultura popolare’; o non la distinguono dalla ‘cultura’ storica, quella della classe dominante, oppure danno alla qualifica ‘popolare’ la connotazione tipica della stampa comunista, che vuol dire tutt’altra cosa, e che non viene mai comunque legata alla parola ‘cultura’ (se non in qualche particolare contesto). Non c’è da meravigliarsi che questi nostri intellettuali non conoscano De Martino, né i testi scientifici di etnologia. Tutta la loro foga conoscitiva pare esaurirsi nelle poche letture letterarie e giornalistiche d’obbligo. Linguistica ed etnologia sono accuratamente ignorate. Ma Lévi-Strauss! Ma lo strutturalismo! Non sono stati d’obbligo?”

⁹⁵ Claude Lévi-Strauss, “The Structural Study of Myth,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 68, no. 270 (October–December 1955): 428–444.

Matsumoto's Oedipus: Self-Negation and the Emergence of "Neo-Documentarism" and a New Japan

This part of the study focuses on the film *Funeral Parade of Roses* (1969) by director Toshio Matsumoto, in which the figure of Oedipus appears in multiple forms. As in the works of Pasolini, Matsumoto combines — although in a completely different and original way — the features of the classical hero with elements of a psychoanalytic interpretation of the myth. These elements are likely complemented by a culturally specific Japanese reading of Freudian ideas.

Another factor that brings these directors together is their sympathy for left-wing movements in their respective countries. This political orientation has often been regarded by scholars and film critics as a kind of lens through which their films are interpreted. This has already been demonstrated above in the case of Pasolini.

In the case of Matsumoto, in addition to analyzing the many faces of Oedipus presented in his work, this section also assesses the extent to which the director's political position is reflected in *Funeral Parade of Roses*. This, in turn, makes it possible to reach more well-grounded conclusions about how the choice of the Oedipal narrative may be connected with the author's reflections on the socio-political reality of his time.

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, with reference to the book *Eros Plus Massacre: An Introduction to the Japanese New Wave Cinema* by the scholar of Asian cinema David Desser, many of Toshio Matsumoto's films can be classified as protest or oppositional cinema, including the film analyzed in this thesis.⁹⁶ A similar position is confirmed in the works of other researchers of Japan in the 1960s–1970s and of its social and creative climate. Examples include the article *Japan's New Left and New Wave*⁹⁷ by Ferran de Vargas and *Introduction to Matsumoto Toshio: A Theory of Avant-Garde Documentary*⁹⁸ by Michael Raine.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that Matsumoto's oppositional stance was not always directly political. His protest actions were focused primarily on the desire to create a revolution in art and cinema rather than on the desire to change society, although he certainly shared the values of the left-radical movements in Japan. In other words, unlike some directors for whom cinema was an instrument of political struggle⁹⁹, for Matsumoto political struggle itself became only a thematic basis,

⁹⁶ David Desser, *Eros Plus Massacre: An Introduction to the Japanese New Wave Cinema* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 96.

⁹⁷ Ferran de Vargas, "Japan's New Left and New Wave: An Ideology's Perspective as an Alternative to That of National Cinema," *Arts* 8, no. 1 (2019): 1–14.

⁹⁸ Michael Raine, "Introduction to Matsumoto Toshio: A Theory of Avant-Garde Documentary," *Cinema Journal* 51, no. 4 (June 2012): 144–47.

⁹⁹ Desser, *Eros Plus Massacre*, introduction, 3.

material, or plot for the creation of a new cinema. Such an observation about the shift in the focus of protest in Matsumoto's work can be found, for example, in the book *Cinema of Actuality*¹⁰⁰ by Yuriko Furuhashi, in the article "Neo-documentarism" in *Funeral Parade of Roses*¹⁰¹ by Mika Ko, as well as in Matsumoto's own academic texts and interviews. Understanding this nuance helps to better interpret both certain facts of the director's biography and his films. This applies in particular to *Funeral Parade of Roses*.

Regarding his biography, as noted above, Matsumoto was sympathetic to the New Left. For example, while studying art history¹⁰² at the University of Tokyo, he was a member of the communist-affiliated student organization *Zengakuren*¹⁰³ and participated in *Bloody May Day* protests against the Japanese government in 1952¹⁰⁴. After graduating from the university, he also joined creative associations with Japanese artists and intellectuals who identified themselves as communists. Nevertheless, Matsumoto never joined the Japanese Communist Party. Among his colleagues, this "stirred much controversy"¹⁰⁵ around his figure.

One episode that highlights both Matsumoto's ambiguous political position and his stronger commitment to revolutionizing cinema rather than society is described by Aaron Kerner and Miyo Inoue in the introduction to their interview with the director. The interview was conducted in 2009, translated into English, and published in 2014:

"Matsumoto was working in a community of thinkers and artists, and this is certainly reflected in the themes that are addressed in his own work. Radical intellectuals, artists, and filmmakers were critical of the 1970 Osaka World's Fair (Expo), which they held represented the worst of consumer culture and as a distraction from the struggle against the renewal of the US-Japan Security Treaty (ANPO). ANPO spawned violent protests. In the years leading up to the 1970 Expo, a number of artists were recruited to participate, including Matsumoto. While Matsumoto had reservations, he justified participation as a means of raising the funds that made his production of *Bara no sōretsu*¹⁰⁶ possible."¹⁰⁷

Bara no sōretsu, or *Funeral Parade of Roses*, is often called Matsumoto's first feature film. However,

¹⁰⁰ Yuriko Furuhashi, *Cinema of Actuality: Japanese Avant-Garde Filmmaking in the Season of Image Politics*, Asia-Pacific: Culture, Politics, and Society (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

¹⁰¹ Mika Ko, "'Neo-documentarism' in *Funeral Parade of Roses*: The New Realism of Matsumoto Toshio," *Screen 52*, no. 3 (Autumn 2011): 376–90.

¹⁰² Miyo Inoue and Aaron Kerner, "Imagining Reality as a Set of Chinese Boxes: An Interview with Matsumoto Toshio," *positions* 22, no. 4 (2014): 907.

¹⁰³ Raine, "Introduction to Matsumoto Toshio," 144.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Inoue and Kerner, "Imagining Reality as a Set of Chinese Boxes," 908.

¹⁰⁶ This is the Latin transliteration of the Japanese title of the film *Funeral Parade of Roses*.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

as will be discussed later, this work is more unconventional than what is usually classified as a feature film.

Before *Funeral Parade of Roses*, Matsumoto was known primarily as a director of documentary films, although he always worked in an experimental manner.¹⁰⁸

In the 1960s, two of his works were selected for the documentary section of the Venice Film Festival and received awards there. In 1961, his film about textile production, *Nishijin (The Weavers of Nishijin)*, was awarded the San Marco Silver Lion.¹⁰⁹ A few years later, in 1967, the film *Haha-tachi*¹¹⁰ (*Mothers*), which depicts relationships between mothers and children from different countries and cultures and addresses issues of racial inequality as well as criticism of wars, particularly the Vietnam War, received the Grand Prix — the Golden Lion¹¹¹. It is important to note that in the 1960s the documentary section and the main competition program of the Venice Film Festival functioned, in practice, as two separate festivals with different juries. However, they took place in parallel, at the same location and at the same time.¹¹² This also suggests that Matsumoto was in Venice when *Edipo Re* by Pier Paolo Pasolini was first screened there.

No information has been found on whether Matsumoto and Pasolini met personally at that festival or whether Matsumoto attended the premiere screening of *Edipo Re*. Therefore, it is only possible to record this intersection as a fact. Nonetheless, Matsumoto's *Funeral Parade of Roses*, released two years after the festival, contains a direct visual reference to Pasolini's film. This moment will be examined in more detail below.

When discussing Matsumoto's experimental approach to cinema, which can be seen both in his documentary films and later in his feature films, it is important to emphasize his key theoretical work *A Theory of Avant-Garde Documentary*¹¹³. This text was first published in June 1958 in the Japanese

¹⁰⁸ Roberto Mario Danese, "Edipo al funerale delle rose: l'*Edipo re* di Sofocle nel cinema di Toshio Matsumoto," in *Edipo classico e contemporaneo*, ed. Francesco Citti and Alessandro Iannucci (Hildesheim / Zürich / New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 2012), 312–13.

¹⁰⁹ Postwar Japan Moving Image Archive (PJMIA), "Toshio Matsumoto Filmography," accessed March 4, 2026, https://pjmia.wordpress.com/toshio_matsumoto_filmography/

¹¹⁰ It can also be found under the title *Okasan*, which is the Latin transliteration of the word "mother." In essence, it is a synonym for *Haha-tachi*, but one that is more colloquial.

¹¹¹ La Biennale di Venezia, "Haha-tachi (Mother)," ASAC – Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee, accessed March 4, 2026, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210415025036/http://asac.labiennale.org/it/passpres/cinema/avancericerca.php?scheda=6591&nuova=1&Sidopus=6591&ret=%2Fit%2Fpasspres%2Fcinema%2Fannali.php%3Fm%3D41%26s%3D46%26c%3Deo>

¹¹² Aida Vallejo, "The Rise of Documentary Festivals: A Historical Approach," in *Documentary Film Festivals*, vol. 1, ed. Aida Vallejo and Ezra Winton (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 77–100.

¹¹³ Matsumoto Toshio, "A Theory of Avant-Garde Documentary," trans. Michael Raine, *Cinema Journal* 51, no. 4 (Summer 2012): 148–54.

film journal *Kiroku eiga* (which means “documentary film”). In this article, he proposed the creation of a new type of cinema — the “avant-garde documentary film” or “neo-documentary.”¹¹⁴ These would be films that move beyond the limitations imposed on the filmmaker both by the conventional understanding of avant-garde cinema and by the then widespread understanding of documentary filmmaking.¹¹⁵ Matsumoto criticized the avant-garde of the early 20th century for its overly subjective perception and representation of reality. In his view, this approach risks isolating the film from the external world and allowing the author’s interpretation to dominate completely.¹¹⁶ At the same time, Matsumoto identified the opposite tendency — the filmmaker’s attempt to remain completely objective — as the main problem of documentary cinema in his time. As the author himself writes:

“The documentary filmmaker who tries to shoot the subject [taisho] with an unemotional eye and so cannot break through to a total grasp of reality by means of documenting their own inferiority [...]”¹¹⁷

According to Matsumoto, the first step toward resolving this dilemma and creating “reform films that respond to the task of the current age, films that will create the new realism”¹¹⁸ was to recognize and accept the filmmaker’s own subjectivity rather than deny it. After this, one should proceed to “self-negation to aim for a higher-order realism.”¹¹⁹ By “self-negation,” Matsumoto did not mean a return to objectivity. Rather, he implied the need for the filmmaker to step outside the conventional role of the director — to stop observing and recording reality from a distance and instead experience himself as part of that reality, filming from within it.

At this point it is important to note that the idea of self-negation can be considered specific to Japan. This should be kept in mind when analyzing the film *Funeral Parade of Roses*. According to the scholar of East Asian studies Ferran de Vargas, the concepts of “self-negation” and “self-denial (jiko hitei),”¹²⁰ together with self-destructive tendencies, were important for modern Japanese society not only because of the traditionally “significant role of suicide in Japanese culture,”¹²¹ but also because they became part of the ideology of Japan’s New Left:

“[...] in order for the masses to have autonomy, the political subject must subjectively deny themselves, self-questioning their own position in the network of power relations, attacking oneself as a part of the ruling system in order to transform that very system”.¹²²

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 154.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 151-52.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 149-50.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 152.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 154.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 152.

¹²⁰ De Vargas, “Japan’s New Left and New Wave,” 9–10.

¹²¹ Ibid., 11.

¹²² Ibid., 9-10.

Ferran de Vargas also notes that these tendencies are visible in the work of film directors of the 1960s–1970s. Many of them either identified themselves with the New Left or at least moved in the same circles and expressed solidarity with them. Among such works, he also lists Matsumoto’s *Funeral Parade of Roses*.¹²³

Thus, self-negation, as an important step, should lead — according to Matsumoto — to the union of subjective and objective reality in cinema. However, for this synthesis to take place, the director must understand the dialectics of the interaction between the external (objective) and the internal (subjective) worlds. In this regard, Matsumoto proposed drawing on psychoanalysis:

“It is necessary to become aware of the territory of the unconscious that forms of realism until now have for the most part ignored and make it the subject [taisho] of the film. That which corresponds to the changing, actual, new reality: the complex movements of interiority that form by jutting out of what one has already become aware; something like what Jung called the collective unconscious, the false image in the heart created by alienation and oppression that is locked up in the subconscious; or what Lefebvre says should be called the biological content of art, spontaneous things informed by instinct and the unconscious including even sex. What’s important is to discover what lies between all of those: in summary, the world beneath consciousness, and the external world itself”.¹²⁴

The film *Funeral Parade of Roses* essentially became Matsumoto’s first full-length experiment in this new genre that he himself had formulated. This is expressed in the alternation of fictional and documentary scenes. The film also uses non-professional actors, including the drag queen Peter who, while playing the main character, in a certain sense represents themselves.¹²⁵ In addition, the film includes interviews with real gay men and gay cross-dressers. Finally, the psychoanalytic interpretation of the myth of Oedipus becomes a key structural element of the film.

In this light, this film is indeed difficult to define as a conventional feature film. Matsumoto himself rejected this classification in an interview that he gave in the 1990s to the historian of Japanese cinema Aaron Gerow:

“Yes, the first one was *Funeral of Roses* which was released in 1969, but it was not as if I was thinking at the time that I wanted to switch to fiction films [...] I wanted to make a kind of experimental, dramatic film that had not existed before, I was provocatively raiding the fiction film world as a guerrilla. Thus in this project, my creative intent was to disturb the perceptual schema of a dualistic world dividing fact from fiction, men from women, objective from subjective, mental from physical, candidness from masquerade, and tragedy from comedy. [...] While I was not clearly conscious of it at the time, this effort connects with the concept of the postmodern that appeared later. In a sense, this

¹²³ Ibid., 11.

¹²⁴ Matsumoto, “A Theory of Avant-Garde Documentary,” 151–52.

¹²⁵ In this thesis, the pronouns they/them/themselves are used when referring to drag queens and gay cross-dressers.

kind of rejection of the ordered and arranged world of the dualistic law of perspective I am talking about is a way to start bringing modernity into question.”¹²⁶

The postmodern features of this film are also visible in the interweaving of numerous quotations “from literature, theater, painting, and music old and new from both East and West,”¹²⁷ as Matsumoto himself stated in the same interview.

Another feature is the director’s attempt to combine many different identities in the image of Oedipus, or more precisely, to place many masks on him at the same time. One mask carries the features of the ancient hero. Another shows the clear trace of the Freudian complex. Yet another reflects national characteristics of this complex and recalls the phenomenon of “amae” described by Takeo Doi (this concept was discussed at the end of the second chapter and will be mentioned again below). Finally, there is the last mask — or perhaps only the last one identified — through which one can recognize the urge to self-negation characteristic of the artists of the Japanese New Wave and their circles. How exactly these masks of Oedipus appear in *Funeral Parade of Roses* will become clear through a detailed analysis of the film itself.

Thus, the very first shot begins with an intertitle in Japanese. In the English subtitles, this text is translated as: “I am a wound and a blade, a victim and an executioner.”¹²⁸ At first the text appears in white on a black background, but after a second it is inverted and becomes black on white, as if continuing the play with duality and oppositions suggested by the content of the phrase itself (Fig. 1–2). The words themselves paraphrase lines from Charles Baudelaire’s poem *L’Héautontimorouménos* (*The Man Who Tortures Himself*) from the 1857 collection *Les Fleurs du mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*):

“I am the wound and the dagger!
I am the blow and the cheek!
I am the members and the wheel,
Victim and executioner!”¹²⁹

¹²⁶ Toshio Matsumoto, interview with Aaron Gerow (1996), quoted in Danese, “Edipo al funerale delle rose,” 313.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ *Funeral Parade of Roses*, directed by Toshio Matsumoto (1969). Transcript,” SubsLikeScript, accessed March 5, 2026, https://sublikescript.com/movie/Funeral_Parade_of_Roses-64068

¹²⁹ Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil (Les Fleurs du Mal)*, trans. William Aggeler, intro. Frank Pearce Sturm (Overland Park, KS: Digireads.com Publishing, 2015), 84.

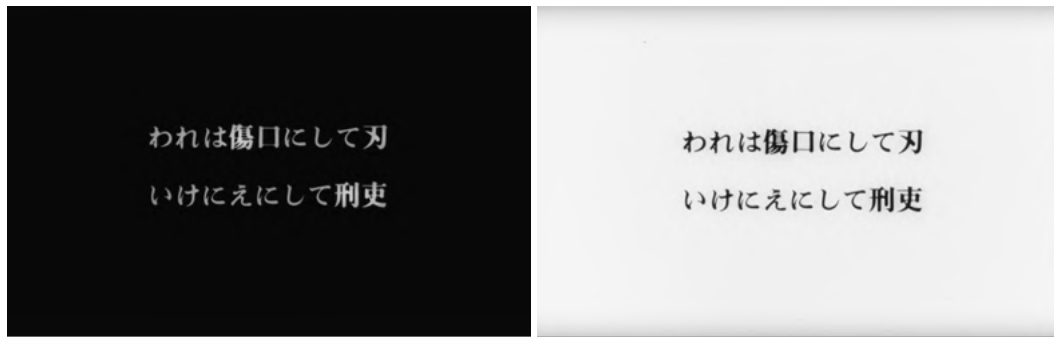


Fig. 1–2. A quotation referring to Baudelaire at the very beginning of the film.

In the context of the myth of Oedipus, the meaning of these lines recalls an interpretation of Sophocles’ tragedy that has been mentioned earlier. This interpretation was articulated by the classicist Bernard Knox. It presents Oedipus as a hero who fully bears responsibility both for his victories and for his tragic outcome and suffering.¹³⁰

The film then abruptly shifts to another quotation — this time a cinematic one. The close-up shots of the embrace between the main character Eddie (the director’s version of Oedipus) and their lover Gonda (Fig. 3), in *Funeral Parade of Roses* resemble the opening sequence of *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) by Alain Resnais (Fig. 4). Matsumoto confirmed the presence of this reference to Resnais’s film in the previously mentioned interview with Aaron Kerner and Miyo Inoue.¹³¹ Moreover, the cinematic aesthetics of Alain Resnais served, in some sense, as an example for Matsumoto and something he sought to emulate. He spoke about this in his essay *A Theory of Avant-Garde Documentary*. In that text, he analyzed the film *Guernica* (1950) by Alain Resnais and Robert Hessens as an example of cinema that combines the avant-garde with documentary filmmaking.¹³²

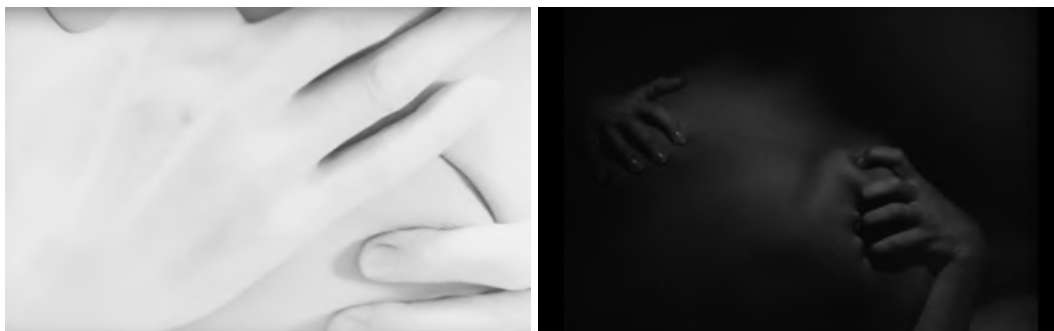


Fig. 3. The opening sequence of *Funeral Parade of Roses* (1969). **Fig. 4.** The opening sequence of *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959).

¹³⁰ Bernard Knox, “Chapter One: Hero,” in *Oedipus at Thebes: Sophocles’ Tragic Hero and His Time* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 6.

¹³¹ Inoue and Kerner, “Imagining Reality as a Set of Chinese Boxes,” 915.

¹³² Matsumoto, “A Theory of Avant-Garde Documentary,” 152.

Furthermore, the comparison with *Hiroshima mon amour* is not only visual but also conceptual.¹³³ In Resnais's film, the narrative is based on the repressed traumatic memories of the female protagonist that suddenly emerge from her memory. In a similar way, in *Funeral Parade of Roses* the narrative is later shaped by the subconscious of the main character, Eddie.

After the sex scene between Eddie and Gonda, the viewer learns that the protagonist is a young gay cross-dresser who has recently begun working at the underground gay club *Genet*, owned by Gonda. It is managed by his partner, the drag queen Leda. Gradually, Leda discovers the secret romantic relationship between Eddie and Gonda.

A clear hint at the Oedipal conflict — now not only in the classical sense but also in its psychoanalytic interpretation — appears in the moment when Eddie and Gonda leave the apartment where they spent the night and drive together in a car. First, Eddie notices Leda through the car window and becomes anxious that they might have seen them together. This anxiety then develops into strange visions. Eddie sees a photo of a man whose face has been burned out with a cigarette. At this point, the viewer cannot yet understand the meaning of this image. However, later in the film, when the photo reappears, it becomes clear that it depicts Gonda. He is not alone in the picture but surrounded by his family: his wife and a small son. Gonda's face in the photo was burned out by his wife after he left her and their child. As can later be understood, that child is Eddie themselves. All these details are revealed through sudden flashes of Eddie's memories (Fig. 5–10).

As can be seen in the still frames below, during one of these memories Eddie becomes unwell and leans against a wall covered with posters for the film *Edipo Re* by Pasolini (Fig. 8). This can be read as a reference to the Italian film. It also functions as an additional hint for the viewer that Eddie and Gonda are connected not only by a romantic relationship but also by kinship.



¹³³ Inoue and Kerner, "Imagining Reality as a Set of Chinese Boxes," 915-16.



Fig. 5–6. Eddie and Gonda are driving in a car when Eddie suddenly recalls the photo with the burned face. **Fig. 7–8.** Eddie recalls the same photo again, but this time more details become visible. During this recollection, Eddie begins to feel unwell and leans against a wall covered with posters for *Edipo Re*. **Fig. 9–10.** Eddie recalls their childhood after being abandoned by their father. Their mother smokes and looks at the family photo.

Later, Eddie experiences other visions that reveal another key element of the Oedipal conflict — rivalry with a parental figure. These memories come to Eddie when they find themselves at the exhibition *One Hundred Masks (Hyakkamen)* by the artist Ikeda Tatsuo.¹³⁴ During the exhibition, an audio recording with a monotonous voice plays in the hall. The voice reflects:

“People always wear masks and see masks when they look at others. Even if they remove their masks... you can't be sure if you're seeing the real face underneath. There is a second mask underneath the first mask. And a third mask is hidden underneath the second mask. Therefore, the other person may think of your mask as yourself...”¹³⁵

This hypnotic speech, together with the kaleidoscope of masks depicted in the paintings and flickering before Eddie’s eyes, immerses them in even more traumatic memories. At this point, these memories are still barely recognizable and not fully understandable. However, they already lead the viewer toward removing the protagonist’s mask and seeing beneath it the killer of their own mother (Fig. 11–14).

¹³⁴ Inoue and Kerner, “Imagining Reality as a Set of Chinese Boxes,” 918.

¹³⁵ Funeral Parade of Roses, directed by Toshio Matsumoto (1969). Transcript,” SubsLikeScript, accessed March 5, 2026, https://sublikescript.com/movie/Funeral_Parade_of_Roses-64068



Fig. 11–14. The scene in which Eddie looks at the exhibition *One Hundred Masks*. Suddenly they experience a vision of their mother wounded by a knife.

It becomes undeniably clear later in the film that Eddie killed their mother. At this point, the memories no longer appear as a series of flashes but unfold as a long and detailed scene. The sequence of Eddie’s actions as a teenager becomes visible, clearly revealing the murder. These memories come to Eddie after an argument with Leda, who by that time has already understood that their partner Gonda is cheating on them with Eddie. At the beginning of these memories, the previously mentioned family photo appears again. Eddie finds it in a book with the symbolic title *Return of the Father*. After that, they take a knife and goes to their mother’s room (Fig. 15–22).





Fig. 15–16. Eddie discovers the family photograph in the book *Return of the Father*. **Fig. 17–22.** The scene in which Eddie kills their mother.

Unlike both the ancient Oedipus and the Oedipus in Pasolini’s interpretation, Matsumoto’s Oedipus does not appear to be overcome by rage that obscures reason at the moment of the murder. They act slowly, with pauses, almost without emotion, but with extreme cruelty. After stabbing her once, they decide that this is not enough and stab her again many times. The count of these knife blows ends at the same moment when Eddie’s memory itself breaks off.

In Matsumoto’s interpretation, Oedipus seems to lose its familiar identity. The myth is reinterpreted here not only in a psychoanalytic way. The inversion of key elements of the plot — the murder of the mother instead of the father and the homosexual relationship with the father — destroys the familiar structure of the myth and destabilizes the gender roles embedded in it.

The director himself explained the decision to complicate the Oedipal conflict and the problem of incest by introducing the theme of same-sex love, which was also associated with the semantics of social prohibition, in the following way:

“*Bara no sōretsu* is a film about boundaries. [...] I have to jar the spectator’s consciousness from a place governed by boundaries to a place that is unreliable and hard to get a secure footing, where the objective tools of assessment no longer function. The obvious example of this is that of the “gay boys” themselves. What determines the grounds for the clear boundary between men and women? Back then gay boys were a very new social phenomenon in Japan; it was just beginning to be talked about publicly, and people responded negatively to these gay boys as something that just shouldn’t be part of acceptable norms. [...] But to get to the point, the reason why people disregard gay boys is that the

existence of gay boys — who are physically men but can live only as women — compromises the clear boundary between things. Similarly, everything relies on dichotomies.”¹³⁶

Thus, it can be said that in creating this film the director sought to break not only the boundaries between subjective and objective reality, between the external and the internal world, and between the avant-garde and documentary cinema. His goal was the blurring of all boundaries and an attempt to destroy the habitual dichotomous principle which, in his view, lies at the basis of human thinking, decision-making, judgment, and action. Why? The author does not provide a direct answer to this question. Perhaps the aim was to create a film so striking and experimental that the world had not seen anything like it before. Or perhaps it was to “start bringing modernity into question.”¹³⁷ It may also have been an attempt to capture the difficult-to-express feeling produced by this modernity and to document it. These possibilities, however, do not contradict each other. All of them were mentioned by Matsumoto at different times in connection with the film *Funeral Parade of Roses*. In an interview, he spoke about how the film sought to capture modernity (or at least its characteristic elements):

“**Aaron Kerner:** As we know, obviously Shinjuku Nichome¹³⁸ is the center of gay culture in Tokyo. So Shinjuku is a really important feature of *Bara no soretsu*...

Toshio Matsumoto: It is.

Aaron Kerner: ...and the film kind of becomes an embodiment of Shinjuku.

Toshio Matsumoto: Exactly, since the city of Shinjuku was filled with a strange energy, and in a way the spirit of the age poured in and accumulated there and the city was about to explode.”¹³⁹

In the film itself, the recording of the signs of the time appears, for example, through the inclusion of documentary footage of protests against the Japanese government. These images are then followed by fictional scenes in which the main character Eddie bandages the head of an opposition protester injured during a demonstration (Fig. 23–24).



Fig. 23. Documentary footage from an anti-government protest in Japan in the 1960s. **Fig. 24.** The scene in which Eddie bandages the head of a protester injured during the demonstration.

¹³⁶ Inoue and Kerner, “Imagining Reality as a Set of Chinese Boxes,” 913.

¹³⁷ Toshio Matsumoto, interview with Aaron Gerow (1996), quoted in Danese, “Edipo al funerale delle rose,” 313.

¹³⁸ The main filming of *Funeral Parade of Roses* took place there.

¹³⁹ Inoue and Kerner, “Imagining Reality as a Set of Chinese Boxes,” 925.

Matsumoto also conveys the life of Japanese youth in the late 1960s through scenes in which Eddie spends time with their friends. In one such scene, the protagonist smokes marijuana in a room covered with posters of *The Beatles*.

These details provide grounds to argue that the film *Funeral Parade of Roses* resonated with Japanese reality in the 1960s–1970s. When discussing such a resonance, one may also recall the observations of the psychoanalyst Takeo Doi from the influential book *The Anatomy of Dependence* (1971). Although the book was published after the film, it presents Doi's ideas about the Japanese form of the Oedipus complex — “amae” — which he had already begun to publish in the early 1960s.¹⁴⁰

As mentioned in the second chapter of this study, Doi extrapolated the concept of “amae” to the collective level. In this model, the Oedipal conflict between father and child is not resolved through protest. Instead, it is softened through the weakening of the father figure and through the desire to neutralize conflicts and prohibitions.¹⁴¹

Developing these ideas further, Doi also argued that the phenomenon of “amae”, characteristic of Japanese culture, lies at the basis of “homosexual feelings.”¹⁴² He explained: “I use ‘homosexual feelings’ here in a broader sense, to refer to cases where the emotional links between members of the same sex take preference over those with the opposite sex.”¹⁴³

In his view, the experience of such feelings in itself is not pathological.¹⁴⁴ However, the situation changes when “homosexual feelings” encounter prohibition and repression. If a person is unable to endure the internal conflict and the frustration of these feelings — or, on the contrary, becomes excessively focused on same-sex relationships — this may lead to severe psychological states, self-destructive behavior, or a desire to destroy whatever prevents the person from obtaining what is desired.¹⁴⁵

The actions of Eddie shown in the film appear to resemble an illustration of Doi's theoretical framework. However, no evidence has been found to indicate that Matsumoto was acquainted with Doi's concepts of “amae” or “homosexual feelings.” Any such parallel must therefore remain speculative. It may be more appropriate to treat it not as a substantiated analytical claim but rather as a provisional observation, suggesting a possible resonance. This resonance may stem from the fact

¹⁴⁰ Takeo Doi, “The First Idea of Amae,” in *The Anatomy of Dependence*, trans. John Bester (Tokyo, New York, and San Francisco: Kodansha International, 1981), 24–25.

¹⁴¹ Doi, “Amae and Modern Society,” 150–57.

¹⁴² Doi, “The Pathology of Amae,” 113.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 116–23.

that both the film and the theory emerged within a shared historical and cultural context, which may have led them to reflect similar patterns, even independently of one another.

Thus, the motif of self-destruction gradually leads to the final scenes of *Funeral Parade of Roses*, where the key characters Eddie and Gonda experience a moment of anagnorisis.

Gonda wakes up in the morning at Eddie's home. While Eddie is doing their makeup, Gonda examines the bookshelf and takes from it the book *Return of the Father*, which had already appeared in the scenes connected with the memories of the murder of Eddie's mother. Inside the book, Gonda finds the same family photo in which his face has been burned out. He recognizes his wife and realizes that Eddie is the son whom he once abandoned. After this realization, he commits suicide by cutting his throat with a knife. When Eddie finds Gonda's body, the memory of the photo returns to their mind once again. They grab the same knife and blind themselves with it (Fig. 25–30).



Fig. 25–26. At Eddie's home, Gonda discovers the book *Return of the Father* with the family photo inside. **Fig. 27–28.** Gonda kills himself with a knife. **Fig. 29–30.** After seeing Gonda's body, Eddie blinds themselves with the same knife.

In the very final shot, an intertitle in Japanese appears again (Fig. 31). In English, it reads: "The spirit

of an individual reaches its own absolute through incessant negation.”¹⁴⁶ It is a free translation of the line “L'esprit individuel atteint l'absolu de soi-même par négations successives” from a poem by René Daumal, published in his 1936 collection *Le Contre-Ciel (The Counter-Heaven)*.¹⁴⁷

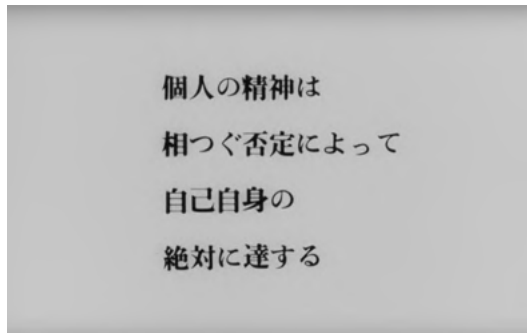


Fig. 31. The final shot refers to the poetry of René Daumal.

In the context of such an ending, it is appropriate to recall the reflections on the principle of self-negation which, according to the scholar of Asian studies Ferran de Vargas, was an important element of the ideology of Japan’s New Left¹⁴⁸. However, the complexity and multilayered nature of *Funeral Parade of Roses* do not allow its interpretation to be reduced only to the claim that it represented Matsumoto’s political position. Moreover, such a claim would be incorrect if we take into account another detail mentioned earlier — the director’s neutrality toward politics and the Japanese Communist Party. When discussing self-negation in his essay *A Theory of Avant-Garde Documentary*, which was intended to establish the principles of a new avant-garde documentary film, Matsumoto deliberately distances himself from politics:

“Socialist realism too, even while seeming like it aims to fundamentally grasp or create a world, is in fact completely naive in the way it falls into putting theme and politics first [...] The failure should be attributed to [the way the previous generation of film makers] turn their own concepts and feelings into stereotypes, to the lack of a strong subjective consciousness that would produce self-negation by means of actual material reality, and especially to the lack of a methodological consciousness that can grasp and express the world as a totality by means of the conflict and unity of external reality and internal reality.”¹⁴⁹

Thus, the self-destruction of the protagonist in *Funeral Parade of Roses*, which according to director himself was the first full-length attempt to develop “neo-documentarism” — should be understood

¹⁴⁶ *Funeral Parade of Roses*, directed by Toshio Matsumoto (1969). Transcript,” SubsLikeScript, accessed March 5, 2026, https://sublikescript.com/movie/Funeral_Parade_of_Roses-64068

¹⁴⁷ René Daumal, *Le Contre-Ciel*, suivi de *Les dernières paroles du poète*, preface by Claudio Rugafiori (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1990), 26.

¹⁴⁸ De Vargas, “Japan’s New Left and New Wave,” 9–10.

¹⁴⁹ Matsumoto, “A Theory of Avant-Garde Documentary,” 153.

not as an allegory of political self-negation, but rather as a symbol of a broader crisis and a reconsideration of established paradigms, both in social life and, perhaps above all for Matsumoto, in the cinematic practices of the 1960s–1970s.

Oedipus in *Chinatown*: The Afterlife of a Canonical Detective

Structure

The final section examines the film *Chinatown* (1974). It focuses on the indirect presence of the Oedipus myth through the inclusion of key attributes of ancient tragedy in the film. It also considers the narrative structure, which, similar to classical tragedy, is based on an investigation that involves the gradual movement of the main character from ignorance to the revelation of the truth.

As in the previous sections, this film interpretation is examined in the context of the socio-political events of the time, in order to assess the presence or absence of resonance with these events. In addition, following the logic of the analysis of the previous films, attention is first given to a brief history of the film's production.

If in the previous films the director appeared as the primary figure shaping the meaning of the story, its key details, and the way it would be told, the situation with *Chinatown* (1974) is different. As can be recalled from the section on *Edipo Re*, Pasolini himself worked on the screenplay, making it partly autobiographical. He personally selected the actors and filming locations, and so on. Matsumoto also constructed the concept of his film entirely on his own. In an interview with Aaron Kerner and Miyo Inoue he explained: “Even the script supervisor of the film often leaned over to me and said, ‘Director Matsumoto, we cannot connect this scene with other scenes!’ In that sense, even my own staff did not understand the project.”¹⁵⁰

Chinatown had two principal authors: the director Roman Polanski and the screenwriter Robert Towne. Without the work of the latter, the film would most likely never have been made. In his memoirs, Robert Evans — the film's producer and at the same time the head of *Paramount*, the studio responsible for distributing *Chinatown* — recalls the beginning of the work on the film as follows:

“[...] Before I could get into *Gatsby*, Towne began telling me about an original screenplay he was working on.

‘It's about how Los Angeles became a boomtown — incest and water. It's set in the thirties. A second-rate shamus gets eighty-sixed by a mysterious broad. Instead of solving a case for her, he's the pigeon. I'm writing it for Nicholson.’

[...]

Towne was a script doctor who didn't have enough money to get new soles for his shoes. Yet at the time, his integrity was such that he turned down \$175,000 for *Gatsby* to schreibe *Chinatown* for

¹⁵⁰ Inoue and Kerner, “Imagining Reality as a Set of Chinese Boxes,” 926-927.

\$25,000. After an hour of his telling me the story, I understood it less, but how could I turn down the top script doctor in town when he's willing to work for scale plus change?"¹⁵¹

Robert Evans believed in the project. However, by his own account, when Towne presented the script after six months of work, the plot of *Chinatown* had become even more complicated: "The more Towne tried to explain, the more frustrating the exercise. I couldn't take it. 'Don't explain it, Bob. Write it'."¹⁵²

A moment came when a director had to be invited to the project, and Evans placed his bet on Roman Polanski. The producer hoped that at least Polanski might be able to understand what he called "the script no one understood."¹⁵³

At that time Polanski was in Rome. He had left the United States immediately after the tragic death of his pregnant wife, the actress and model Sharon Tate, who was murdered by the gang of the serial killer Charles Manson.¹⁵⁴ He did not plan to film in Hollywood again.¹⁵⁵ In one interview he admitted that these events traumatized him for the rest of his life. A deep sense of guilt took root in him, because at the moment of Sharon's death he was not with her. He was filming in London: "I can't enjoy myself as freely as I used to. I feel the same sense of Jewish guilt as my father did, and Sharon's death increases my belief in the absurd."¹⁵⁶

In general, Polanski did not wish to return to Los Angeles. As he wrote in his memoirs in 1984, "every street corner"¹⁵⁷ there reminded him of the tragedy. He was seriously determined to remain living and working in Europe: "My months in Rome had convinced me that Europe was my true home [...] I had no desire to reopen old wounds by returning to L.A. I didn't swallow my reluctance until Bob Evans called..."¹⁵⁸

The director had friendly relations with Robert Evans and had already collaborated successfully with him.¹⁵⁹ In particular, Polanski's hit psychological thriller about occultists, *Rosemary's Baby* (1968),

¹⁵¹ Robert Evans, *The Kid Stays in the Picture*, First New Millennium printing (Beverly Hills, CA: New Millennium Press, 2002; originally published 1994), 262–63.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 263.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 264.

¹⁵⁴ "Chronology," in *Roman Polanski: Interviews*, ed. Paul Cronin (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), xvi–xvii.

¹⁵⁵ Roman Polanski, "Roman's Novel," interview by Franz-Olivier Giesbert (1984), in *Roman Polanski: Interviews*, ed. Paul Cronin (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 107.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ Roman Polanski, *Roman* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1984), 347.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 346.

¹⁵⁹ Evans, *The Kid Stays in the Picture*, 143.

was a project of the renewed *Paramount* studio after the collapse of the old Hollywood system¹⁶⁰, with Evans at its head.¹⁶¹ As a result, after Evans's persistent urging, Polanski agreed to come to the United States to discuss work on *Chinatown*.

However, when the director became familiar with the script, his verdict produced mixed feelings for the producer.¹⁶² In Polanski's opinion, the screenplay required substantial revision. Nevertheless, the director saw potential in it and became interested in the project. "I'll fix it,"¹⁶³ he told the producer. In essence, this meant that Polanski was taking on the project.

Later he explained his decision to return to the United States despite the "old wounds" by identifying three reasons: a long-standing desire to make a detective film¹⁶⁴, the need to earn money¹⁶⁵, and the conviction that "buried somewhere in its [Towne's screenplay — author's addition] 180-plus pages was a marvelous movie."¹⁶⁶

As Polanski wrote about the screenwriter Robert Towne, he was a "craftsman of exceptional power and talent."¹⁶⁷ However, the director also noted that it was not easy to reach mutual understanding with him.

This is also confirmed by the memoirs of the producer of *Chinatown*, Bob Evans. He described the co-authorship of Polanski and Towne as follows: "Feverishly, Roman got into the screenplay with Bob and the fights started."¹⁶⁸

Before presenting the essence of these "fights," which is important for the analysis of *Chinatown* and for understanding the place of the Oedipal conflict in this film, it is worth briefly outlining the plot. As already mentioned above in the quotation from Robert Towne himself, the events of the film take place in Los Angeles in the 1930s. The private detective Jake Gittes (Jack Nicholson) investigates the death of Hollis Mulwray, an engineer in the city water department, in parallel with the police and independently of them. Hollis Mulwray is the husband of the main female character, Evelyn Mulwray (Faye Dunaway). During his investigation, the detective uncovers a large-scale fraud involving the water supply of Los Angeles. The operation has led to a severe drought in the city and to the decline

¹⁶⁰ Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, "American Cinema in the Postwar Era, 1945–1960," in *Film History: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003), 327–329.

¹⁶¹ Evans, *The Kid Stays in the Picture*, "Foreword," xii.

¹⁶² Evans, *The Kid Stays in the Picture*, 265.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ Roman Polanski, "Incest Is Interesting," interview with *Der Spiegel* (1974), in *Roman Polanski: Interviews*, ed. Paul Cronin (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 60.

¹⁶⁵ Polanski, *Roman*, 347.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 346.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 348.

¹⁶⁸ Evans, *The Kid Stays in the Picture*, 265.

of farms in the surrounding area. The main figure behind the scheme is the wealthy Noah Cross, Evelyn's father. People hired by him drain fresh water from the city reservoir at night, effectively creating the drought artificially. This fraud allows Cross to buy devalued land and eventually become the owner of a vast territory in the surroundings of Los Angeles. The engineer Hollis Mulwray tried to stop it and was murdered by Cross's hired men. Simultaneously with his investigation of this crime, Gittes uncovers a secret from Evelyn's past. When she was a teenager, her father, Cross, raped her, which resulted in her pregnancy. Evelyn subsequently ran away from home and secretly gave birth to their daughter, Katherine. Only recently did Cross learn of Katherine's existence, and he has since been attempting to locate her and take her away.

So, when Polanski first read the screenplay, he perceived it as a work brimming "with ideas, great dialogue, and masterful characterization."¹⁶⁹ However, as he later noted in his memoirs, the script "suffered from an excessively convoluted plot that veered off in all directions."¹⁷⁰ The narrative was structured around two dominant strands: a corruption scheme and a family crime. Polanski insisted that the focus of the film should shift from the theme of the abuse of power and public resources to incest and tragedy.¹⁷¹

In the final scene of the film, which takes place in Chinatown, Evelyn dies while trying to escape with her daughter. She is fleeing both from the police, who suspect her of murdering her husband Hollis Mulwray, and from her father, who has tracked her down and arrives in Chinatown in order to take Katherine. According to Polanski, Towne did not want the ending to be tragic. In a 1974 interview with *Der Spiegel*, the director stated that he himself rewrote the ending immediately before filming the final scene, because he was convinced that the tragic nature of the resolution had to be brought to the point of absurdity:

"Spiegel: Is it true you argued with the author of the screenplay over the ending?
Polanski: Yes. He wanted the bad guy, old Noah Cross, to die at the end, after being shot by Faye Dunaway, at all costs. I felt this was too romantic, too much of a happy ending. I wanted the film to end in utter tragedy, with the Faye Dunaway character dying for no reason at all, and for her father — with whom she'd fought over for the child they have together — to get away clean, just like most bad guys really do."¹⁷²

Regarding incest, in the same interview Polanski admitted that this theme was not sufficiently developed in the film, although in his view it was central:

¹⁶⁹ Polanski, *Roman*, 346.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 346.

¹⁷¹ Sam Wasson, *The Big Goodbye: Chinatown and the Last Years of Hollywood* (London: Faber & Faber, 2021), 139.

¹⁷² Roman Polanski, "Incest Is Interesting," interview with *Der Spiegel* (1974), in *Roman Polanski: Interviews*, ed. Paul Cronin (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 61.

“Spiegel: [...] Which is more important for you in the film, the water scandal or the incest?”

Polanski: The incest, which is the real cause of the catastrophe in the end. In reality, the capitalist swindle with the water and land of Los Angeles doesn't bother anyone. But the incest — this private scandal — is really exciting and I'm a bit disappointed it doesn't come through more persuasively. The film would have been more sensational if I could have emphasized the affair more, and it certainly would have got more publicity. But unfortunately the plot made that impossible.”¹⁷³

Nevertheless, *Chinatown* was highly successful. In 1975 the film received 11 Academy Award nominations, and Robert Towne won the Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay.¹⁷⁴ In the same year the film won four Golden Globes in the categories Best Motion Picture — Drama, Best Director, Best Actor, and Best Screenplay.¹⁷⁵ It also received three major awards at the 28th British Academy Film Awards: Best Direction, Best Actor, and Best Screenplay.¹⁷⁶

Despite Polanski's statement that the theme of incestuous relationships could not be made central, early reviews of the film attributed great importance to it: “The incest touch is a masterful stroke in *Chinatown*, complicating as it does the political overtones and striking at the root of the human potential for evil and perversity,”¹⁷⁷ writes Wayne D. McGinnis in the article “*Chinatown*”: *Roman Polanski's Contemporary Oedipus Story*, published in 1975. As can be seen from the title of the essay, the theme of incest is discussed in connection with the myth of Oedipus, which, according to McGinnis, is reinterpreted in the film in a new way, sometimes in a rather unexpected manner.

For example, McGinnis drew a parallel between Los Angeles suffering from drought and Thebes stricken by the plague.¹⁷⁸ To some extent, this parallel can be seen when comparing the film and the ancient tragedy. The representation of the scene in which farmers protest at the city water council in *Chinatown* (Fig. 1–3) resembles the gathering of the people in front of the palace of Oedipus. In both Sophocles and Seneca, this assembly was represented by the chorus. How angry this chorus was, rather than simply oppressed by the plague, remains open to the imagination of readers of the tragedy. In particular, Pasolini in *Edipo Re* chose to depict the inhabitants of Thebes as insistently calling upon the king to solve the problem that is destroying the city (see Fig. 4, where Pasolini himself appears in

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 61–62.

¹⁷⁴ Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, “The 47th Academy Awards | 1975,” Oscars.org, accessed March 12, 2026, <https://www.oscars.org/oscars/ceremonies/1975>

¹⁷⁵ Hollywood Foreign Press Association, “1975: A Turning Point,” Golden Globes, accessed March 12, 2026, <https://goldenglobes.com/articles/1975-a-turning-point/>

¹⁷⁶ British Academy of Film and Television Arts, “Film Awards 1975,” BAFTA, accessed March 12, 2026, <https://www.bafta.org/awards/film/?award-year=1975>

¹⁷⁷ Wayne D. McGinnis, “‘Chinatown’: Roman Polanski's Contemporary Oedipus Story,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 3, no. 3 (Summer 1975): 250.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 249.

a cameo at the head of the suffering people of Thebes). It is possible to assume that the creators of *Chinatown* also portrayed angry farmers, in their own way quoting the chorus from the ancient work. However, they never explicitly stated this.



Fig. 1–3. Scene from the film *Chinatown* (1974): farmers, together with their livestock, burst into the city water council meeting. **Fig. 4.** Scene from the film *Edipo Re* (1967): Pasolini, in a cameo role as a representative of the people of Thebes, demands that Oedipus find salvation from the plague.

For the sake of clarity, it should be noted that McGinnis himself did not justify his comparison between Los Angeles and Thebes through a possible subconscious association between the protesting farmers and the chorus from the Oedipus story. The reasoning about such an association is a heuristic device employed by the author of this thesis. Instead, Wayne D. McGinnis argued for the similarity between Los Angeles and Thebes by comparing the behavior and actions of the ancient Oedipus with those of the main villain of *Chinatown* — Noah Cross.

“Cross has augmented the plight of the desperate farmers in the valley [...] by siphoning off water at night from the public reservoirs into the Pacific Ocean [...] This is, of course, a change in the Oedipus story, in which Oedipus also “uses” a plague on a city — but innocently — to get into public power and then harbors corruption, although unknowingly.”¹⁷⁹

Here is another illustrative fragment:

“Oedipus Rex, with its hero of “guiltless guilt,” implied a troubled Athens, a time of intellectual upheaval not unlike our own.

[...]

Oedipus Rex, then, was staged in much the same sort of malaise it imitates in its action, and *Chinatown* is being shown in a decade which it alludes to as vastly corrupt. Polanski has simply emphasized the “badness” of the Oedipus figure, the corrupt ruler Noah Cross.”¹⁸⁰

How McGinnis managed to find a motif of Oedipus’s corruption in the ancient tragedy is a major

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 249–250.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 250.

question. If one recalls the analysis of the tragedies of Sophocles and Seneca from the first chapter of this thesis, which relied on the publications of historians and classical philologists, it becomes clear that in both tragedies Oedipus sought to solve the problem of his people rather than worsen it. In Sophocles, he appears as a noble leader of Thebes who sincerely loves his people and cares for them.¹⁸¹ In Seneca, the situation is different. Oedipus fears his guilt before the people and at the same time does not want to lose power. However, he is presented rather as an ambiguous and insecure ruler, not as a corrupt villain.¹⁸²

Another aspect is also noteworthy. McGinnis compared the resonance of the *Chinatown* in relation to the socio-political events of the 1970s in the United States with the relevance that Sophocles' tragedy had for Athens in the 5th century BCE. In making this comparison, he referred to the works of Bernard Knox. Relying on the authority of the well-known classicist, McGinnis claimed that Knox described Athens of Sophocles' time as immersed "in the atmosphere of decay."¹⁸³ According to McGinnis, such an atmosphere "predominates in both works"¹⁸⁴ — in the ancient tragedy *Oedipus Tyrannus* and in the film *Chinatown*.

Indeed, Knox mentioned the possible foreboding among the Athenians of their future defeat in the Peloponnesian War, which occurred approximately two decades after the tragedy was written.¹⁸⁵ However, Knox never stated that Athens was in decline. On the contrary, he emphasized its valor, the rise of its development, and its intellectual superiority.¹⁸⁶ The only key point in Knox's ideas that might have led McGinnis to associate the situation with decline was his emphasis on the idea that superiority cannot last forever. When a peak is reached, as happened both with Athens and with Oedipus, it may end in tragedy.¹⁸⁷ This is, of course, a subtle nuance. However, if one carefully examines both the text of the tragedy itself and Knox's analysis, the difference between a state of decline and a premonition of the end of triumph becomes noticeable.

Nonetheless, the author of the article "*Chinatown*": Roman Polanski's Contemporary Oedipus Story was understandably inclined to search for allegories of corruption and political intrigue in both the film and the ancient tragedy. McGinnis wrote this article at a time when American society was

¹⁸¹ Bernard Knox, "Hero," in *Oedipus at Thebes: Sophocles' Tragic Hero and His Time* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 3–52.

¹⁸² Anthony J. Boyle, *Seneca: Oedipus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), lvi–lxxxvii.

¹⁸³ McGinnis, "'Chinatown': Roman Polanski's Contemporary Oedipus Story," 250.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ Bernard Knox, "Athens," in *Oedipus at Thebes: Sophocles' Tragic Hero and His Time* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 99–106.

¹⁸⁶ Bernard Knox, "Preface to the New Edition," in *Oedipus at Thebes: Sophocles' Tragic Hero and His Time* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), xi–xii.

¹⁸⁷ Knox, "Athens," 99–106.

shocked by the Watergate scandal, which led to the resignation of Richard Nixon from the presidency. The reason for the resignation was the attempt by Nixon's associates to install listening devices in the *Watergate Complex*, where the headquarters of the president's political opponents — the United States Democratic Party — was located. When information about this reached the press, Nixon and the presidential administration attempted to conceal the installation of the devices. However, the investigation confirmed the president's involvement in a political crime, and he decided to leave office voluntarily.¹⁸⁸ McGinnis himself even mentioned the Watergate scandal, quoting a review of *Chinatown* by the film critic Paul Zimmerman, who described the scheme shown in the film as “Watergate with real water.”¹⁸⁹

McGinnis then expressed another original idea. He argued that in the film *Chinatown* the figure of Oedipus was split:

“But Polanski has also split the Oedipus figure: the person in Chinatown who mirrors the “good” Oedipus, trying to figure out the source of the corruption, is the cool and suavely self-assured detective, Jake Gittes. Here again, the parallel with Oedipus Rex is striking. In confronting the web of evil perpetrated by Cross, Gittes is reasonable and shrewd, the mock sophisticate detective.”¹⁹⁰

Gittes indeed carries several traits that are characteristic of the ancient Oedipus. He is intelligent, resourceful, and confident in his abilities and in his capacity to solve even the most complex riddle. Like Oedipus in the classical tragedy, he refuses to remain in ignorance and continues to investigate the murder of Hollis Mulwray. He had the opportunity to abandon the case without even losing his fee for the job. However, he chose to continue. Bringing this investigation to its conclusion becomes Gittes's personal initiative and his personal responsibility. This ultimately leads him to tragic consequences, just as in the case of Oedipus. In Gittes's case, the tragedy lies in the absurd death of Evelyn Mulwray. By that time, he had begun to feel affection for her and was trying to help her escape with her daughter from both the police and the pursuing Noah Cross.

A similar parallel between the detective Gittes and the ancient Oedipus is also proposed by the classical philologist Mary-Kay Gamel in the article *An American Tragedy: Chinatown*.¹⁹¹ This work was published in the collection by film philologists *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema* (2001), which was mentioned in the introductory part of this thesis. In this essay, Gamel also suggests that in *Chinatown* the Oedipal motif became an allegory for the upheavals of the 1970s. She develops this

¹⁸⁸ Keith W. Olson, *Watergate: The Presidential Scandal That Shook America*, with a new afterword by Max Holland (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2016).

¹⁸⁹ Paul Zimmerman, “Blood and Water,” *Newsweek*, July 1, 1974, 74, quoted in McGinnis, ““Chinatown’: Roman Polanski’s Contemporary Oedipus Story,” 249.

¹⁹⁰ McGinnis, ““Chinatown’: Roman Polanski’s Contemporary Oedipus Story,” 250.

¹⁹¹ Mary-Kay Gamel, “An American Tragedy: Chinatown,” in *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema*, ed. Martin M. Winkler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 155.

parallel through an attribute that is central to ancient tragedy: the connection between sight and knowledge. Both in tragedy and in real life, not everything that eyewitnesses see ultimately proves to be the truth.¹⁹² At the same time, Gamel does not refer to specific events such as the Watergate scandal. Instead, she compares the tragic tension of the ancient Oedipus narrative with the broader atmosphere of tension that characterized the period in which *Chinatown* was created.

According to Gamel, key attributes of the Oedipus myth — such as knowledge and misconception, sight and blindness, and incestuous relations — are dispersed throughout the film and appear in different characters. Even the figure of Evelyn Mulwray reflects aspects of Oedipus. According to Gamel, this is suggested by her eye, which is pierced by a bullet in the final scene of the film (Fig. 5). It recalls the empty eye sockets of Oedipus at the end of the tragedy.¹⁹³

Gamel also connects another moment from the same final scene of *Chinatown* with the motif of sight and blindness. This is the moment when Noah Cross covers the eyes of his granddaughter-daughter, who has just witnessed the shooting of her mother beside her in the car¹⁹⁴ (Fig. 6).



Fig. 5. Evelyn Mulwray with a bullet wound in her eye. **Fig. 6.** The main villain of *Chinatown*, Noah Cross, covers the eyes of Katherine, who has just witnessed the death of her mother.

These parallels appear quite convincing, but they should not be taken as direct references to the myth of Oedipus, especially since no evidence has been found that Towne or Polanski intentionally invoked the ancient tragedy.

¹⁹² Ibid., 166.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 155.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

The only mention of Oedipus by one of the creators of the film — namely the screenwriter — was found in the doctoral dissertation *The Screenplays of Robert Towne 1960–2000* by Elaine Lennon. The author cites the following remark from an interview Towne gave to the BBC:

“I think all detective movies are a retelling of Oedipus. I mean those kinds of detective movies where the detective in looking for the solution to the crime finds he’s part of the crime, he’s part of the problem.”¹⁹⁵

As can be seen from this statement, the screenwriter did not speak about any intentional reference to Oedipus in the creation of *Chinatown*. However, he acknowledged that this ancient tragedy functions as a kind of template for many modern detective stories. This is particularly true for stories in which responsibility for the development of events lies with the main character — the investigator. This observation allows the conclusion that the Oedipus myth was present in *Chinatown* as an organizing narrative matrix or structure. At the same time, its presence may not have been consciously recognized during the creation of the film.

Polanski also spoke about cliches and stable narrative structures in connection with his films. In the previously mentioned review of *Chinatown* by Paul Zimmerman, published in *Newsweek* a few days after the film’s premiere, the following words of Roman Polanski are cited:

“I love the cliches. Practically every film I make starts with one. I just try to update them, give them an acceptable shape. They’re extremely valuable. Great artists always use them”.¹⁹⁶

However, the director never stated that the Oedipus tragedy itself functioned as such a cliché for the detective plot of *Chinatown*. Nor did he say that a Freudian interpretation of the Oedipal conflict served as the basis for the incest between the main female character Evelyn Mulwray and her father Noah Cross.

This observation may be strengthened by an important remark made by the art historian Ernst Gombrich. While developing the iconological approach — and in some sense questioning the ideas of his colleagues Warburg, Saxl, and Panofsky that the afterlife of ancient images and motifs in later art reflects shifts in worldview paradigms within society — he noted that artists have a natural professional tendency to copy representations of reality that they see in the works of one another. Even if a particular author intentionally revived an ancient motif in a work in order to convey the emotional or philosophical concept embedded in it, there is no reason to assume that the same

¹⁹⁵ Robert Towne, “Writing *Chinatown*,” BBC television interview, first broadcast February 1997, quoted in Elaine Lennon, *The Screenplays of Robert Towne 1960–2000* (PhD diss., Dublin Institute of Technology, 2009), 211.

¹⁹⁶ Paul Zimmerman, “Blood and Water,” *Newsweek*, July 1, 1974, 74, quoted in McGinnis, “‘Chinatown’: Roman Polanski’s Contemporary Oedipus Story,” 249.

intention guided other authors whose works also display similar motifs.¹⁹⁷

Returning to *Chinatown*, it can be said that the creators of the film may well have reproduced the structure of the Oedipus myth and some of its key attributes without necessarily being fully aware of it. For this reason, it would be speculative to claim that the traces of the Oedipus myth in this film directly reflect the upheavals of the era.

Nevertheless, *Chinatown* did reflect its own historical moment, regardless of whether this had anything to do with the Oedipus myth. Robert Towne wrote about this in the essay *The plight of screenwriters: The difficulty of maintaining cinematographic illusions*, where he retrospectively assessed the 1960s and 1970s:

“And even when our society changed dramatically in the sixties and seventies, many films — The Godfather, Taxi Driver, and Chinatown among them — found receptive audiences. They did so by dramatizing the disparity between the establishment’s view of the country and what many Americans were beginning to take to be the awful truth: Vietnam, Watergate, perceptions of hideous racial inequality. Again, a series of shared beliefs, in this case focusing on what was wrong with the country, created a sense of communion between filmmakers and filmgoers.”¹⁹⁸

Roman Polanski, who generally remained apolitical — a position that sometimes caused discontent among some of his more radical colleagues¹⁹⁹ — also connected *Chinatown* with the crisis of modern society. However, it must be acknowledged that he expressed this idea in a much more cautious manner than Towne. Here is his comment on this subject from the aforementioned interview:

“Spiegel: Is the film also a commentary on the United States?”

Polanski: I didn’t set out to say anything in particular about America, but the film does mirror something of the condition of the United States with all its intrigues and scandals, though you find these things in any country where money and power matter. A film that doesn’t make any statement at all about society — and ourselves — would be completely empty. If *Chinatown* didn’t have certain moral and critical qualities under the surface, I wouldn’t have made the film. It’s also about the difficulty of learning the truth, whether about politics or the relationship between a man and a woman.”²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁷ Ernst Gombrich, “Truth and the Stereotype,” in *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1960), 63–90.

¹⁹⁸ Robert Towne, “The Plight of Screenwriters: The Difficulty of Maintaining Cinematographic Illusions,” in *The Way We Work: On the Job in Hollywood*, ed. Bruce Ferber (Los Angeles: Rare Bird Books, 2019), 17.

¹⁹⁹ Richard Brody, *Everything Is Cinema: The Working Life of Jean-Luc Godard* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008), 331. Here referring to the events of the 1968 Cannes Film Festival, when Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut called for the festival to be halted in solidarity with the May 1968 protests in France, while jury member Roman Polanski opposed stopping the screenings.

²⁰⁰ Polanski, “Incest Is Interesting,” 62.

Conclusions

In conclusion, it is important to restate the research question that served as the starting point of this study. Namely, was the afterlife of the myth of Oedipus in the cinema of the 1960s–1970s resonant with the socio-political events and the intellectual climate of that time?

To answer this question, the ancient interpretations of the myth of Oedipus and their analysis by historians and classical philologists were examined. The study also considered the reinterpretation of this myth in the works of intellectuals of the second half of the 20th century and, finally, in the cinema of the same period.

When studying modern interpretations of the myth, the socio-political context of the time was, of course, taken into account. Without this context, it would have been difficult to draw any conclusions about the resonance between new interpretations of Oedipus and the events of the 1960s–1970s. In addition, the cultural specificity of the different countries where the films were produced was also considered. The revival of the myth of Oedipus in cinema was examined through three films from three countries — Italy, Japan, and the United States: *Edipo Re* (1967) by Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Funeral Parade of Roses* (1969) by Toshio Matsumoto, and *Chinatown* (1974) by Roman Polanski.

For the analysis of the films, an interdisciplinary framework was applied that combined the iconological approach with film-philological practices. These methods made it possible to identify the key attributes of the myth of Oedipus, to conduct a comparative analysis between classical interpretations of the myth and modern cinematic interpretations, and to examine primary sources connected with the production of the films.

Among the primary sources were reviews by film critics and audiences written at the time of the films' release, essays by the directors from the same period, their statements at film festivals, and their interviews. Essays and memoirs written by contemporaries of the directors were also examined. In particular, the analysis of Pasolini's film used materials from the Pier Paolo Pasolini Archive at the Cineteca di Bologna (Italy). The study of the two later films by Matsumoto and Polanski was based on interviews, essays, and memoirs published in books and articles that are more widely accessible.

The conducted analysis of films, primary and secondary sources makes it possible to argue that the presence of the myth of Oedipus in cinema of the 1960s–1970s and the atmosphere of social upheaval, the crisis of former regimes of knowledge and power, and the transformation of modernity were not accidental in their interconnection. The myth became a form of response to reality, as well as a tool for reflection on ongoing events. Moreover, it resonated not only with socio-political upheavals (as reflected in the film *Chinatown*, according to early reviews), but also with deeper existential and value-based transformations of society and the individual (as is characteristic of the film *Edipo Re*). In addition, the myth became a highly expressive formula of the idea of self-negation for the

formation of both a new modern subject and a new form of cinema (as emphasized in *Funeral Parade of Roses*). All these conclusions are confirmed both by statements made by the filmmakers themselves and by their contemporaries — the first viewers and reviewers.

Providing a more detailed account of each analyzed film, or rather repeating and summarizing the conclusions made in the respective sections, it should be noted that in *Edipo Re*, Pasolini's resonance with the late 1960s is expressed primarily in his refusal to reduce Oedipus to a narrowly political allegory, as some contemporaries expected. At the same time, he did not remain within the limits of classical or Freudian interpretations. Based on a deeply personal rethinking of psychoanalytic ideas, as well as on contemporary anthropological and structuralist concepts, it can be argued that Pasolini used the myth as a structure that determines the interaction of the subject with the external world, which is in a state of crisis, where the true, natural value of things and human feelings has been lost. This structure does not remain merely an individual reference point. Despite the autobiographical nature of the film, in the final scene the director extrapolates it to the collective level. *Edipo Re* captures the moment of anagnorisis, when the modern individual can no longer fully believe either in progress or in rationalist schemes of self-understanding, yet is also unable to fully move beyond those archaic structures that continue to operate within him.

In *Funeral Parade of Roses*, Matsumoto's resonance with the contemporary period takes a different, yet equally significant form. This cinematic interpretation of Oedipus emerges within the Japanese postwar context, which was marked by waves of political protest activity, cultural Westernization, new artistic practices, and the search for a different form of subjectivity. In this sense, *Funeral Parade of Roses* resonated with the late 1960s as a work about the birth of a new Japan. However, this is not because it offered a positive model of the future, but because it recorded the painful disintegration of old identities and the necessity of creating a different, new form of existence. It is essential to emphasize that Matsumoto, like Pasolini, despite his proximity to a left-radical milieu, did not reduce his film to an instrument of political protest. Nor did he reduce Oedipus solely to classical or psychoanalytic concepts. More important for Matsumoto was a reversal, or even a complete reset, through self-negation (expressed in the film through Oedipus-like character blinding himself). This process concerns both the individual, in the search for a new identity, and the director, in the redefinition of his former professional role aimed at creating a new type of cinema — “neo-documentarism.”

In the case of *Chinatown* by Roman Polanski, the myth of Oedipus functions primarily as a narrative structure. The motif of investigation present in the ancient tragedy is transformed into the structure of a detective film. At the same time, several attributes of the ancient myth can be identified in *Chinatown*: incest; the play on the opposition between the concepts of knowledge and sight; and the figure of the main character who persistently seeks the truth and, through his own actions, leads

himself to a tragic outcome. However, the creators of the film did not consciously rely on these attributes. They never explicitly stated that they were interpreting the ancient myth. Therefore, it is possible to speak about the resonance between the reinterpreted Oedipus tragedy in *Chinatown* and the upheavals of the 1960s–1970s only on the basis of viewers' interpretations of the film. Among these interpretations were some that quite decisively pointed to a revival of the myth in the film and to a connection between the ancient Oedipus story and the contemporary world. In particular, one of the first reviewers of the film, who witnessed the unfolding of the Watergate scandal, the protests against the Vietnam War, and demonstrations in support of marginalized groups, noted that Oedipal motifs are perceived as an allegory of what was taking place in contemporary American society. Specifically, this refers to a situation in which what is presented as truth conceals abuses of power and violence. As a result, the discovery of truth does not bring liberation, but leads to profound disillusionment.

Thus, in concluding this thesis, it can be reasonably stated that the afterlife of the myth of Oedipus on the big screen in the 1960s–1970s became a kind of commentary on the upheavals of the era. Directors and viewers recognized in the ancient hero themselves and their contemporaries — as well as their own blindness to what was happening around them.

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Filmography

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2. *Edipo Re*. Directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini. 1967.

3. *Funeral Parade of Roses*. Directed by Toshio Matsumoto. 1969.
4. *Hiroshima mon amour*. Directed by Alain Resnais. 1959.